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ABSTRACT

Offering the notion of writing pedagogy as a "bazaar with many booths," this collection of articles on teaching creative writing is focused on applicability to all levels of instruction. The 10 articles, after a Foreword by the editor, are, as follows: "Before Writing: Remember What Makes Writing Easy" (Donald M. Murray); "Creative Writing Portfolios in Literature Classes" (William M. Ramsey); "Countee Cullen: How Teaching Rewrites the Writer" (Hans Ostrom); "Bio Bodies" (Jean Siewicki); "Responding to Creative Writing: Students-as-Teachers and the Executive Summary" (Wendy Bishop); "'What's the Use of Stories That Aren't True?' A Composition Teacher Reads Creative Writing" (Kate Ronald); "Writing's in the Bag" (Sheryl Lain); "The Dramatic Climax and 'The Right Way to Write a Play'" (Jon Tuttle); "Invention in the Poetry Writing Class: Adventures in Speech Genres" (Patrick Bizzaro); and "Myths and Little Miracles: Advice to Beginning Creative Writing Students" (Alice G. Brand). (NKA)

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Carolina English Teacher accepts articles, reviews, notes, descriptions of classroom strategies--in short, anything that might be of interest to teachers of language and literature at all levels, kindergarten through college. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, with notes in MLA style. Submit one hard copy and an IBM disk with MS-Word, WordPerfect, or unformated ASCII files or three typed copies with a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Warren and Holly Westcott, Editors, *Carolina English Teacher*, c/o Department of English, Francis Marion University, Florence, South Carolina, 29501.

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Foreword

David Starkey
Guest Editor

Until recently, creative writing has been, like composition, one of the stepchildren of English studies. Though many teachers have employed creative writing in their curricula in a number of imaginative ways, the subject itself was not worthy of being labeled a "discipline." Fiction writers, playwrights and poets simply wrote: one didn't inquire *how*. To do so, in fact, was considered not only bad form, but potentially dangerous to the creative artist. Indeed, the myth still persists that writers who look too closely at their own creative processes are as likely as not to jinx themselves, to weld shut the lid on their source of inspiration.

In the mid-1980s, however, people like Eve Shelnutt, Joseph Moxley and Wendy Bishop--writers doubling as theorists--began to question the integrity of this model. After all, they wondered, weren't creative writing teachers doing their students a disservice by ignoring what the teachers themselves knew about their own methods of invention, drafting and revision? And wasn't there something important to be learned about creative writing from the burgeoning field of rhetoric and composition?

In the past five years, a number of theorists have answered a resounding *Yes* to these questions, and *Carolina English Teacher*'s readers are fortunate to benefit from thinking by some of the most brilliant creative writing teachers in the country. My call for manuscripts attracted instructors from all across the country. Three contributors are from the Palmetto State, but we also have work from North Carolina, Florida, New Hampshire, New York, Nebraska, Wyoming and Washington. *CET* readers will no doubt recognize many well-known names in the table of contents.

While Middle School and High School teachers are represented, the preponderance of the work submitted focused on creative writing at the college level. Articles, therefore, were selected with an eye to their applicability to *all* levels of instruction. William Ramsey's "Creative Writing in Literature Classes," for instance--a detailed overview of the use of creative portfolios as a substitute for conventional essay exams--should work as well in an eighth-grade English class is it does in Dr. Ramsey's college courses. Likewise, Sheryl Lain's "Writing's in the Bag" exercise--which is geared for ninth-graders--is one I can easily envision using in my introductory poetry class at Francis Marion University. Moreover, articles like Donald Murray's "Before Writing: Remember What Makes Writing Easy" and Alice Brand's "Myths and Little Miracles" should prove valuable to teachers and students engaged in serious writing at any level.

Variety, hybridization and cross-fertilization are recurrent themes in this issue of *Carolina English Teacher:* a poet uses literary theory; a literary theorist uses poetry; a composition teacher uses theory, poetry and expository writing; a long-dead poet, thought to be hopelessly conservative, is found on reexamination to be a radical precursor of current writing theorists. The prevailing notion of writing pedagogy as a bazaar with many booths offering many different kinds of commodities is evident throughout the following pages.

Granted, some readers, wary of cryptic and unnecessary jargon, may twinge at the repetitions of the word "theory" and "theorist" in the previous paragraph. They shouldn't. Theory in the hands of the present contributors is not some Frankenstein's monster which turns on its master, but instead provides a way of thinking clearly and coherently about a given topic. The present articles should furnish ample evidence that writing theorists don't have to drape themselves in obscurity when they say what they want to say.

I'd like to thank *CET*'s regular editors, Warren and Holly Westcott, for giving me the opportunity to put together this special issue. Their advice and encouragement was

essential. Our manuscript readers were equally indispensable: Lynn Kostoff at Francis Marion University, Ed Epps at McCracken Junior High School, Nell Braswell at Winthrop University, Curt Elliott at Richland School District 1 , Libby Bernadine and Harriet Williams at the University of South Carolina. Many of the articles that follow have profited from the critical acumen of these hardworking colleagues. Finally, I want to thank the members of the South Carolina Council of Teachers of English for their willingness to take a new look at an old subject. If readers of this issue of *Carolina English Teacher* find themselves reexamining their attitudes towards creative writing even a little, the project will have been worthwhile.

Before Writing:
Remember What Makes Writing Easy

Donald M. Murray
University of New Hampshire

Donald Murray, Professor Emeritus of English, is a novelist, a poet, and a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist. He is best known among English teachers as a lecturer and writer of textbooks on writing and the teaching of writing. His latest books on writing are Shoptalk, Learning to Write with Writers *and* The Craft of Revision.

Before I start a new book project I force myself to write down the attitudes and disciplines that have made the writing easy in the past.

Yes, easy. Writers like to whine and moan about the struggle, the pain, the suffering of writing but they came to writing because it was easier for them than math, more exciting than chemistry, more fun than the playground. Writers lead a marvelous double life, once in actuality, afterwards in the truer reality of story.

Writers celebrate life by recording their world and then shaping memory into meaning. This telling of story, first to the self, later to others, is as natural to writers as breathing; it is the way writers live their lives. But they tell the world writing is hard. Harder than digging a ditch, driving a truck, selling insurance, caring for an eight-month-old boy with a three-year-old brother, teaching teen-agers to write a subject-verb-object sentence? No way.

I fall into the trap myself. No pity is so satisfying as self-pity. And I have been trained to correct error and avoid failure by teachers, editors, parents, and the clergy--I was born in sin as a Calvinist Scot--but we learn to write well if we construct a writing habit based on ease, pleasure, confidence, and success. What worked well in the past is what will make the writing go well the next time around.

Of course some of us zoom from despair to fantasy, remembering a time that never was. My fantasy is that I can write two books at the same time--on top of my weekly newspaper column, my twice a month poems for the poetry club, occasional articles, the proposals for future books and the revisions, instructor's manuals, page proofs, indexes that trail after a "completed" book manuscript.

I chart my course for a new book by writing a memo to myself, reminding myself of what attitudes and habits made the writing go well the last time around. I am still a student of writing at seventy, but I attend a one-room schoolhouse and am responsible for my own curriculum.

1. To write well I need to take advantage of my *difference*.

Until Sandra Cisneros spoke to me from the pages of *American Voices--Best Short Fiction by Contemporary Authors*, selected by Sally Arteseros, [Hyperion, 1992] two years ago, I was ashamed of my "unmanly" sensitivity to life. On the football field, in the paratroops, in college and the City Room, I learned to hide my true feelings, embarrassed by how much I was the watcher, how much the critic of my own living, how often I saw events in a way that set me apart from family and colleagues. My strangeness would be revealed in print--the page does reveal--but I was always uncomfortable with this self-exposure. Then I read Cisneros: "Imagine yourself at your kitchen table, in your pajamas. Imagine one person you'd allow to see you that way, and write in the voice you'd use to that friend. Write about what makes you different."

I accepted, at the age of 68, the obvious. It was my difference that brought me publication. And when I accepted and revealed my individual difference, the more universal I became: readers told me I articulated their silent thoughts and feelings.

2. To write well I need to follow my *obsessions.*

I work best when I have a psychological need to explore the subject. Bharati Mukherjee says, "When my writing is going well, I know that I'm writing out of my personal obsessions." I suspect that most writers have a few obsessions they must investigate with language. Mine are my childhood, my war, my fear of death (obviously related to a sickly childhood, an "if I die before I wake" religion, and infantry warfare), and the writing act (I started collecting the writers' quotes that appear in my work when I was in the ninth grade). If the book does not tap into some deep running underground river in my being, I should give it up.

3. To write well I need to experience *surprise.*

My writing is motivated by the discoveries I make on the page: I write what I do not expect to write. I write best when I write against intent, not by plan, but by accident. John Fowles says, "Follow the accident, fear the fixed plan--that is the rule." I start with a territory to explore and a line, a fragment of language that contains a tension that may release a book: "I had an ordinary war," "after my war I fear Spring," "teachers are urged to write but not told how to develop their workshop fragments." That was the starting place of this book--*Write to Teach Writing*--I am beginning to write for Heinemann. Already, the first test drafts of the opening have contradicted what I believed I would write--a good sign.

4. To write well I need to *write fast.*

Fluency is the product of velocity. I have to get up to speed to write as you have to get up to speed to make a bicycle balance. In school we are often taught to write carefully, slowly, thoughtfully but most writers have to write fast so that they will write what they do not expect. Writers have to give up control of the text, to encourage it to run ahead of them, following its own instincts.

Writing with velocity also produces an adequate amount of text to surprise. School encourages paragraphs; writers need pages--many pages--for the text to build a flood of language that may flow toward meaning.

5. To write well I need to achieve *instructive failures.*

Fast writing also allows the writer to outrun the censor that exists within us all, and it causes the accidents of meaning and language that lead writers where we do not expect to go in the way failed experiments instruct scientists. If I do not fail in interesting and instructive ways, I will not continue the book.

Of course, I have little trouble failing; I have a great deal of trouble accepting and taking advantage of failure.

6. To write well I need to work *within the draft.*

A great danger--and one of the reasons my third novel has not yet been completed--is that I set literary standards for the novel I cannot possibly meet. I remember what teachers, editors, other writers have said and even try to achieve the standards of people I do not like or respect. I set standards that are impossibly high or appropriate for someone else or some other writing project. I must remember John Jerome, "Perfect is the enemy of good," and William Stafford, "I can imagine a person beginning to feel that he's not able to write up to that standard he imagines the world has set for him. But to me that's surrealistic. The only standard I can rationally have is the standard I'm meeting right now . . . you should be more willing to forgive

yourself. It really doesn't make any difference if you are good or bad today. The *assessment* of the product is something that happens *after* you've done it."

Stafford continued, "I believe that the so-called 'writing block' is a product of some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance . . . one should lower his standards until there is no felt threshold to go over in writing. It's *easy* to write. You just shouldn't have standards that inhibit you from writing."

In short, I want to be loved and so look off the page when I know I should work within the page, allowing this page to tell me how to write this draft. Eudora Welty reminds me, "The writer himself studies intensely how to do it while he is in the thick of doing it; then when the particular novel or story is done, he is likely to forget how; he does well to. Each work is new. Mercifully, the question of *how* abides less in the abstract, and less in the past, than in the specific, in the work at hand . . . ."

7. To write well I need to maintain *faith* in the draft.

At least twice in the writing of this book, about one-third and two-thirds of the way through, and perhaps more often, I will doubt the book or my ability to write it. I must then remember that even the fine novelist Alice McDermott admitted: "The hardest thing I had to do even to become a writer was believing that I had anything to say that people would want to read."

To conquer despair I must remember it is natural and force myself to keep writing, remembering that this forced fluency will produce pages that will be as good as the ones written before or after despair. I must believe--against all reason--that my story has not been told before, that I have a special authority to tell my story.

8. To write well I need to establish a *daily deadline.*

Like most writers, I write only on deadline so I establish my own deadlines. My column is delivered Monday morning a week ahead of time so there is opportunity for careful editing and revision. Books have deadlines a year or months away but I break each project down into daily, *achievable* deadlines: 300 words a writing day, 500, 1,000 or even 1,500 on this book I am starting. I may also establish deadlines by task: lead, middle, end, revise, edit. Deadlines by time--an hour at my desk, half-an-hour, two hours--do not work for me. I waste it. I need a product measure to keep me forging ahead.

9. To write well I need to practice a *writing habit.*

Beside my computer is the plastic covered reminder:

NULLA DIES SINE LINEA

Write first each day
Complete one writing task every morning
Know tomorrow's task today

On the other side I have counsel from fellow writers:

> Every morning between 9 and 12 I go to my room and sit before a piece of paper. Many times I just sit for three hours with no ideas coming to me. But I know one thing: If an idea does come between 9 and 12, I am there ready for it. (Flannery O'Connor)
>
> If I don't sit down practically immediately after breakfast, I won't sit down all day. (Graham Greene)
>
> To be a writer is to sit down at one's desk in the chill portion of every day, and to write. (John Hersey)

Two simple rules: A) You don't have to write. B) You can't do anything else. (Raymond Chandler)

The writing generates the writing. (E. L. Doctorow)

There is no one right way. Each of us finds a way that works for him. But there is a wrong way. The wrong way is to finish your writing day with no more words on paper than when you began. Writers write. (Robert B. Parker)

A day in which I don't write leaves a taste of ashes. (Simone de Beauvoir)

If you keep working, inspiration comes. (Alexander Calder)

To write you have to set up a routine, to promise yourself that you will write. Just state in a loud voice that you will write so many pages a day, or write for so many hours a day. Keep the number of pages or hours within reason, and don't be upset if a day slips by. Start again, pick up the routine. Don't look for results. Just write, easily, quietly. (Janwillem van de Wetering)

Perfect is the enemy of good. (John Jerome)

If you want to take a year off to write a book, you have to *take* that year, or the year will take you by the hair and pull you toward the grave . . . . You can take your choice. You can keep a tidy house, and when St. Peter asks you what you did with your life, you can say, I kept a tidy house, I made my own cheese balls. (Annie Dillard)

The art of the novel is getting the whole thing written. (Leonard Gardner)

I believe that the so-called "writing block" is a product of some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance ...one should lower his standards until there is no felt threshold to go over in writing. It's *easy* to write. You just shouldn't have standards that inhibit you from writing . . . . I can imagine a person beginning to feel he's not able to write up to that standard he imagines the world has set for him. But to me that's surrealistic. The only standard I can rationally have is the standard I'm meeting right now...You should be more willing to forgive yourself. It doesn't make any difference if you are good or bad today. The *assessment* of the product is something that happens *after* you've done it. (William Stafford)

Living's hard. It's writing that's easy. (E. Annie Proulx)

I have to force myself to write first. I get up at 5:30 in the morning, but the world still intrudes. There is a letter to answer, a recommendation to send off, a manuscript to read, a computer problem to solve, a family responsibility. But the writing, if you are to write, must come first.

I also need to complete one task a morning so that I build on accomplishment, day after day, do not feel a daily inadequacy that spins me into hopelessness and paralysis.

I need to know the next day's writing task since the most important writing is done away from the desk when I think about the next day's writing without being aware I'm thinking about it, mutter to myself, make daybook notes, discuss it with a writing colleague. That non-writing writing is what ripens the possibilities so that I can do each morning what Virginia Woolf proposed for herself when she said, "I am going to hold myself from writing it till I have it impending in me: grown heavy in my mind like a ripe pear; pendant, gravid, asking to be cut or it will fall."

10. To write well I need *listeners.*

I need colleagues who work in their own lonely rooms and who listen to my satisfactions and my grumps, my problems and my solutions, as a book evolves. Chip, Don, Elizabeth, Brock and sometimes others, give me more than therapy. They give me back my own advice to them when I play their listener. We teach each other what we already know, and I often find myself solving the problem I am describing and which I could not solve until I picked up the phone.

11. To write well I need *readers.*

Few readers. Very few readers. During the first drafts only one--Chip Scanlan because he makes me want to write after he has read an early, not yet ready-for-the-world draft. Then Minnie Mae, my wifely editor, who reads all my final drafts before they leave the house. And there are the others for whom I write--Don, Elizabeth, Brock, Lisa, Tom and others--whom I see in my mind's eye as I write and with whom I silently talk as I compose. And I am blessed with fine editors such as Laurie Runion, who has been an editorial collaborator for many of my books.

But I remind myself to be careful to whom I show my work. Many readers--and this certainly includes editors and teachers--have a rigid formula for each subject and each genre. If the writer does not fit the formula--and the best writers never do--they are surprised, uncomfortable, disappointed and critical. They do not have the ability to evaluate work on its own terms. I have abandoned poems, articles, books because of the well-intentioned but destructive advice of friends with whom I have shared an early draft. For this first draft, I will be my own reader.

Remember Eudora Welty. What has worked in the past may not work in the present. My way of working is not a model for anyone else; it may not even be a model for me. As Graham Greene said, "Isn't disloyalty as much the writer's virtue as loyalty is the soldier's?" I must *not* be loyal to tradition, to what has worked for others, to what I have been taught or learned, to my own plans or expectations. I must follow the draft and, if I am fortunate, it will carry me beyond my imaginings.

Creative Writing Portfolios in Literature Classes

William M. Ramsey
Francis Marion University

William Ramsey is an Associate Professor of English. His publications are in 19th Century American literature, African-American literature, and reader response pedagogy. He also writes poetry.

There is a special joy in teaching literature. It comes when students who have immersed themselves privately in a literary work come to class willing to share that pleasure with others. On these days, class discussion extends the private immersive experience into an enriching communal activity. On these days, too, our pedagogy seems well matched with the core reading experience that we so cherish. Of course, the joy ends with the next exam. Here, as students knuckle down to serious business, the discrepancy between enjoying literature and testing for competencies is dramatic. It is also unnecessary.

The conventional exam requirement lays bare a strange occupational bifurcation in literature teachers. On one hand, we try hard in class discussions to stimulate "appreciation" for literature; on the other, our assessing devices measure a far narrower set of cognitive competencies. Students find too often the conventional exam process is of negative value--a one or two-night cram session, then a torturous testing session, then a prompt forgetting of almost everything crammed. In short, we betray their love of literature with a testing apparatus poorly designed to measure that appreciation.

That is why I have begun to replace exam requirements with creative writing portfolios. My portfolio approach differs from more widely known ones, in which a student's various academic papers--composition essays, literary analyses, reports, test essays, and so forth--are collected in a portfolio for a final grade. Rooted in a holistic learning rationale, my creative exercises aim at minimizing the discrepancy between reading literature and testing a knowledge of it.

The initial reading of a text is a complex "immersion experience." In it, a text we read interacts with us uniquely, powerfully, and on many levels--with our perceptions, emotions, experiences, and values, subtly expanding our perspectives. As we finish reading a story, poem, or play, we feel we have been immersed temporarily in a world that somehow has changed us. Similarly, creative exercises can be designed to elicit experiences that operate holistically on many levels of the person. The result, I have found, is work that replicates more richly and compatibly than test answers the competencies students develop in literary study.

Writing Mark Twain

In teaching *Huckleberry Finn* in an American literature survey, I ask students to write just as Mark Twain would if he were alive today. One exercise (of four Twain exercises offered) improvises on Pap Finn's infamously drunken tirade in Chapter 6. In class I have elicited remarks on whether Pap's racist and anti-government attitudes persist and intertwine in the South today. The portfolio exercise instructions are as follows: "Pap gives a fiercely regionalist oration on 'the nigger and the govment' before passing out dead drunk. Bring Pap into a contemporary setting and a narrative situation, rewriting this speech for some of today's issues."

Here are excerpts from a portfolio entry, achieved after the two re-draftings allowed per entry:

He was almost drunk. I could tell 'cause he was starting to stare at the TV and poke his bottom lip out. He propped his elbow on his knee and dropped his chin in his hand for a minute between drinks; and I thought proudly that if he didn't have no clothes on he'd look exactly like that statue-fellow that just sets there and thinks.

I always hated it when he watched the news and got to drinkin' and cussin' 'bout the govement and all. . . . Course Pap never voted, but he said that was only 'cause he was smart enough to know that all them politicians is crooks. When the news was over, Pap jumped up, turned off the TV with a slap, and started pacing.

"Call this a govement! You see that nigger doctor talkin' on there? A goddam nigger that ain't even learned to speak the English language and she's the Surgeon General! A woman, first of all! And a queer lover. And she wants to give out condoms to little kids in schools and legalize drugs." Pap paused at the table to take a long drink from his bottle. Then he started pacing again, carrying the bottle.

"Clinton ain't 'pointed nothing but niggers and spics and queers and split-tails--oh, excuse me!" He threw his free hand in the air and made a face like he was 'bout to cry and kind of whined, "I ain't bein' politically correct! I'm bein' insensitive. Lord, don't strike me down, please!

". . . I hear they's trying to teach little kids in school 'bout what a queer is and how to be nice to 'em and all. . . . Lemme give you some advice, boy. Don't never even be nice to a queer. He'll take advantage of you while you still smilin'. I tell you what this country needs is a govement that reads the Bible, that knows about how God wiped out a whole fuckin' city of queers. . . ." He was breathing hard and had to slow down to keep from trippin' over his own feet.

"Them people in Washington sittin' 'round in white shirts and air-conditioned offices ain't never had a callus on their hands. Not one of 'em. . . . They'll give out money to the niggers so they can lay around and smoke crack and have nineteen kids, and working men--white working men, that is--can pay for 'em. But they don't give a thing to a man who tries to take care of his own. Look at me. I been fired for no reason, twice in one year. And I still can't git no govement help. But you betcha if I was a nigger they'd come running out here in their white shirts. . . ."

Pap fell into his chair. He lit a cigarette and took a couple of drags 'fore he started sinking and slumping till his shoulders swallered up his neck and his chin landed on his chest. The cigarette slid from 'tween his fingers and landed on the newspaper 'side the chair. I jumped up and grabbed it and stamped on the paper 'fore the little smoking hole could git any bigger.

As Huck's "thinker" slides into drunken oblivion, how accurately repellent seems this distillation of redneck bigotry. This student learned Twain well, and the learning goes deeper than cramming instructional notes. True, those materials are here, for I have lectured on satire, stressing Twain's dissection of American culture. I have explained deadpan humor, noting Twain's mastery of it in the naive persona of Huck. Likewise I have discussed literary regionalism, relishing with students the book's regional vernacular. In such matters this writer shows "learning" not by test essay regurgitation--but by getting into Mark Twain's skin. While requiring mastery of course material, this exercise also is, I believe, a holistic and "immersive" experience.

Going Puritan

For many students, in both theology and expression, the Puritans are forbidding. Edward Taylor's poetry is especially hard to teach. Its metaphysical wit, theological rigor, and antiquated English inspire boredom rather than delight. Imagine the initial resistance to writing a contemporary, unrimed poem modeled on Taylor's "Huswifery." Yet the following poem captures well Taylor's theology, ministerial fervor, and humble reverence:

> Make me, O Lord, Your temple complete,
> for worship services showing
> a humbleness of heart and mind,
> that joyful praises will be lifted
> for Your honor and glory.
>
> Make me Your choir stands
> for singing Your praises
> all the day long.
> May the songs touch hearts
> and let Your Holy Spirit fill them.
>
> Make me Your altar
> for kneeling and praying
> for Your guidance.
> May I tarry and be anointed
> by Your holy oil, so that
> my heart and mind may be healed.

The unpretentious earnestness of this voice is unusual for novice poetry. The writer's humble, sincere aspiration rings true to the Puritan temper. This student captures Taylor's concern with innate depravity and redemptive grace, reflecting also his ardent desire for purity of heart during worship service. Written by a black female, the poem crosses immense cultural divides of race, gender, and historical context, finding in black church experience enduring debts to the Puritan outlook.

The following poem, titled "Tilling the Soul," reflects a Southern white male's agrarian roots. It too connects with Taylor's theology and sensibility:

> Make me, O Lord, Your plow complete.
> Your Word, as handles of hickory straight,
> is for guidance sure and never weak.
> Dear Heavenly Father, like a plowman You'll
> give direction through the fields of life.
> Give me, dear Lord, a plow blade of steel,
> to turn the sod of my soul, making me fine tilth.
> With furrows straight and deep
> Your saving grace I will reap.
> My life, though a field of Satan's keep,
> through You may be harrowed and sweet.
> God's glorious harvest my soul will reap.

Creative exercises such as these may not indicate how strong a formal essay students can write about literature. They may not measure students' objective mastery of historical material. But haven't these students demonstrated considerable literary knowledge?

Holistic Growth and Grading

To privilege academic tests over these creative immersions is to slight a central aim of literature instruction. That aim is growth of the total individual through imaginative interaction with powerful texts. Indeed, literary study as a humanistic discipline has this as a **unique** point of focus.

Yet our traditional assessing devices--such as objective questions and essay exams--are common to many disciplines and are not uniquely expressive of literary endeavor. In measuring so little of a student's complex interaction with text, they dismiss vital areas of growth as peripheral. From a holistic perspective, such tests fail to measure the **full** course content, that is to say the reader's deeply complex engagement with literature.

In my experience, creative exercises help "teach" literature because holistically they assume students' personal perspectives, values, beliefs, backgrounds and even spiritual presuppositions are academically relevant.

Conventional hour exams, in their pursuit of limited cognitive measurements, suppress these areas of development as inappropriate to the so-called "real" business of academic development. Yet the student who brings Pap Finn into contemporary relevance will have for years a vivid identification with Twain. Students imitating Taylor find that Puritan culture is more than musty antiquarian matter--its legacy still animates the personal values of many American students. In such ways creative portfolios are revealing measures of literature's "real" value to them as whole persons.

"But how can you **grade** creative exercises?" I am often asked. "Aren't you grading very personal dimensions of students, things that should not be judged by grades?"

My response is that I grade creative exercises little differently than formal essays. Students that read superficially will write superficially. Lazy writers will write underdeveloped pieces, and they will correct rather than revise entries substantively. Indeed those that listen poorly in class will miss the point of the exercises. Thus students failing to take notes often write the Huck Finn piece in standard English, failing altogether to apply my instructional material on regional vernacular. Likewise, students who think a poem is a series of run-on sentence fragments dashed off without effort--a holiday from sentence grammar--must relearn the complete sentence and sentence boundaries.

The fact is that creative portfolios are no flight from academic rigor, and creative work sorts itself naturally into definable grading categories. When exercises are designed to reflect clear teaching emphases, they will extract a committed response to instruction. Indeed the ongoing process of drafting and redrafting portfolio entries requires serious academic effort, and will lure students into more sustained, personally relevant work than occasional exam preparations. When students make that effort with creative exercises, the fulfillment they attain is compatible with the rich, personally complex experience of literature.

Countee Cullen: How Teaching Rewrites The Writer

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I. More than most literary movements, the Harlem Renaissance continues to resonate and symbolize in our literary and political consciousness. This is so because the movement was at once contrived and spontaneous, potent and blighted, timeless and short-lived—and especially because it either confronted or foreshadowed most of the key conflicts among race, writing, politics, canon-building, gender, and class that were to define American literature and African-American literature during the rest of the century (Lewis; Rampersad).

That this movement remains alive and significant is certainly good news. One piece of bad news is that the further we writers, teachers, and critics travel from such a crucial point in literary history, the more likely we are to accept hardened, simplified definitions of the writers who were and the writing that is "the Harlem Renaissance."

Thus, almost reflexively, we are likely to think of Countee Cullen as the conservative poet among that number when the saints came marching in. (Later I'll take pains to define "conservative" poet, as well as to suggest the limitations of the term). And we are likely to contrast him, not favorably, with Langston Hughes, whose work seems more various and flexible; more politically charged; less constricted by the tenets of a bourgeois American perspective or a staid Anglo-European literary tradition.

To elaborate on the contrast between Cullen and Hughes, it may be useful to review part of the latter's contribution to the Harlem Reniassance and subsequent movements. When Hughes wrote the essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in 1921, there can be no doubt that he laid claim to distinct African-American territories of literature and art, and moreover that he prefigured the politically robust Black Aesthetic of the 1960s, as well as features of "multiculturalism" in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. When he published his short-story collection, *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), he was, to a degree, opening a territory to be explored by James Baldwin and Alice Walker (among others), one involving the confluence of race, class, erotics, and gender in American society. And when he published "Dream Deferred" and poems like it, he was functioning as nothing less than a prophet, telling his nation in plain English cats and dogs could understand that, yes, your cities will explode and continue to explode as long as you mislabel, misunderstand, and defer solving the American dilemma (Gunnar Myrdal's term) of race—that is, until you 'fess up to the single most virulent problem throughout the history of colonial and republican "America" (Myrdal, Bell, and Hacker, among others, are excellent at showing how persistent and destructive racism has been and continues to be in the United States.)

During the Harlem Renaissance, Cullen's stature as a poet was equal to that of Hughes (Lewis 75-78), but since then Cullen's work simply has not been accorded the same value in literary history, nor has it been seen to exert the influence Hughes's work has. Hughes is constantly cited as a crucial precursor to the Black Aesthetic that

emerged in the 1960s; Cullen is not. For the last decade or so, Hughes has undergone widespread republication and scholarly reconsideration that far outstrips interest in Cullen. The conventional wisdom seems to be that Hughes deserves such continued, multifaceted examination in ways Cullen does not.

II. What is not part of the conventional wisdom or the received "headnote biography" of Cullen is that he taught middle-school English for a number of years in Harlem, and that a substantial record of his teaching exists, chiefly at Tulane University (Amistad). What does this have to do with his literary status and his place in the canonical scheme of things? And what does this have to do with teaching creative writing in this day and age?

Good questions, if you don't mind my saying so. They are questions I'd like to try to answer here, and not in a way that will interest only those familiar with Cullen, or with the Harlem Renaissance, nor only in a way that will bear on African-American literature. They are questions that implicitly complicate, if not entirely alter, the contrast between Hughes and Cullen reiterated above.

Such questions also provide one potent way for us to confront our profession's current era, which I would label The Age of the Teacher-Writer. The fact is most writers these days teach, and more teachers than ever write—poems and stories, I mean. We can bemoan, decry, celebrate, or deny this condition, but the condition obtains (Bishop). However, when we "study" writers, we tend to treat the teaching part of their lives and careers either as never having existed or as having been sealed off from "the real work." We tend to do this for some fairly obvious reasons: We are convinced that, in fact, the poems and novels (or whatever) ARE the real work; that teaching is either play or the unreal work. When it comes to the practice of lit. crit., who cares if Robert Frost taught? This attitude carries with it New Criticism's haughty dismissal of biographical criticism, naturally, but it also carries with it the idea that when Frost (for instance) taught, he was merely allowing people to be in his presence, his writerly presence. He wasn't really a "teacher." To play a riff on Archibald McLeish's infamous edict (in the poem "Ars Poetica") a writer should be, not teach.

And of course, when it comes to our own lives as writer-teachers or teacher-writers, we are just as mightily conflicted—as the awkward, hyphenated terms themselves symptomize. For example, we may live to write, but we teach to live: Alienation 101.

More specifically, here are some points I want to pursue in order to answer the broad questions just outlined:

1. Countee Cullen led a double literary life, the ostensible "non-literary" (teaching) part of which we dare not ignore if we are to understand his work, his milieu, and his poetics fully.
2. In allowing his Harlem students certain literary maneuvers he did not always allow himself, Cullen dramatized key conflicts within the Harlem Renaissance; prefigured important developments in composition studies; and gave us a lens through which to (re)read his work. To some extent, my argument here is that the sustained teaching career of a writer is in itself an intellectual, critical, epistemological "act"--a working out of ideas about literacy and literature; therefore, what we know about such teaching adds a dimension that is every bit as telling as letters, essays, memoirs, diaries, and so forth in the study of writers and their work.
3. The case of Countee Cullen can instruct all of us as we make our costume changes from Writer to Teacher to Theorist to Compositionist to Critic to Self-Critic to Master to Apprentice; the case can teach us about our teaching, and about interpreting the costumes into which we madly change in our fragmented one-

person shows. If his teaching can be a lens through which to view his work, it can also be a lens through which to view our work.

4. In literal and figurative terms, Cullen was also a student, and a black student in white-supremacist America. In his teaching and writing, he compensated for losses and humiliations suffered as a student—just as we do, even if some of our sufferings are much less considerable, not racial, and so forth. I will not insult you or Cullen by suggesting that we all need to get in touch with our inner student or that all sufferings are equivalent; however, when we focus on power, the hard barriers supposedly separating teaching, learning, and writing evaporate, and in significant ways, our "studentness" sticks with us, sometimes in most unhealthy, conflicted ways.
5. And finally, Cullen's teaching helps focus questions of genre, especially questions about appropriate genres and about revealing differences between what writer-teachers assign to their students in the way of genres and what writer-teachers themselves write.

III. Before I explore these points, let me, as promised, touch briefly on Cullen's literary conservatism, which applies to his work chiefly on two counts: subject matter and linguistic choices. These are hopelessly relative counts, of course, but in relation to other Harlem Renaissance writers, Cullen seems to favor universal subject matter, as opposed to writing more explicitly about material conditions, concerns, and predicaments more explicitly African-American. Further, he seems less inclined to remake the traditional forms in which he writes—ballad or sonnet, for instance—than Hughes, and here is an obvious place where questions of genre and questions of literary politics converge. Finally, Cullen is more inclined than Hughes to employ formal standard English that sometimes appears even to have more in common with British English than American English.

I acknowledge how imprecise the term "conservative" is in this context, but it still seems applicable in the sense that Cullen's work retains many longstanding elements of British lyric poetry, many "genre-characterisitics," if you will. By contrast, Hughes's poetry deliberately, frequently, irreverently improvises upon such characteristics and sometimes even abandons them altogether. Consider one stanza from the Cullen poem "From the Dark Tower":

> We shall not always plant while others reap
> The golden increment of bursting fruit,
> Not always countenance, abject and mute,
> That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap; (Williams)

The message here is not meek, the way with words not inconsiderable. But in the company of works by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, such writing seems extremely reserved, buttoned down, forced, occasionally antique. Reticence, formality, blandness—these are among the characteristics associated with Cullen's verse and supportive of the term "conservative." Contrast "From the Dark Tower" with Hughes' "Dream Deferred" or even the Madame poems, and you will likely see merit in the characterization. David Lewis writes, "Sometimes Cullen must have set even Harlem's teeth on edge with *Crisis* [magazine] throwaways lisping of a 'daisy-decked' Spring with her 'flute and silver lute'" (Lewis 77). The term "throwaway" implies the idea that Cullen's poetry was weakest when certain poetic manners I have been calling "conservative" became formulaic--easily tossed, thrown, and therefore easily dismissed--tossed out.

The nature and function of Cullen's conservative choices, including choices of genre and within genre, are more complicated, however, than this basic sketch and the

earlier contrast with Hughes reveal. For one thing, not all of his poems are the same—an obvious point but one that's easy to misplace. In "Saturday's Child" (Williams 616), for instance, Cullen seems to inhabit the form--in this case, a ballad--more successfully, finding a way to drive the verse with a more self-possessed diction. By "inhabit," I mean a kind of maneuver in which writers impose power or authority over a genre, as opposed to the maneuver to which Lewis refers in the paragraph above--a detached, unassertive, self-defeating manipulation of stock techniques or genre elements. Here is one stanza from "Saturday's Child":

> Death cut the strings that gave me life,
> And handed me to Sorrow,
> The only kind of middle wife
> My folks could beg or borrow.

One reasonable reading of such a representative stanza is that Cullen successfully exploits the tension between and among three genres--monologue, ballad, and lyric. In its own way, such a poem is both conservative (attentive to tradition) and improvisational in the way Wordsworth's most successful "lyrical ballads" are. There are too many pitfalls to count in representing Cullen as the Wordsworth of the Harlem Renaissance, but drawing a momentary parallel between the two writers is instructive, helping to illuminate how writers, how Cullen, interacted with genres.

One point to stress, then, is that "conservative" by its very nature is an extremely broad term, and that even when we take pains to narrow its application we must recognize that a writer may be both ineffectively conversative (writing "throwaway" poems, for instance) and effectively conservative (exploiting tensions between traditional genres, for example).

The scope and direction of this essay are such that, for more extensive explorations of what I've labeled as Cullen's "conservatism," its complexity, and its limitations, I would refer readers to the work of Avi-Ram, Lomax, and Shucard.

Let us move now to the more central concern of this essay, which is that the circumstances of Cullen's writerly choices, including choices concerning genre, are perhaps most startlingly complicated by what we know about his teaching.

IV. When, in the mid-1930s, Cullen joined the faculty of Frederick Douglass Junior High School (P.S. 139) in Manhattan (Harlem), he did so chiefly to make a living. But however simple his reasons may have been, to enter that world was to enter a bewilderingly complex matrix of political forces, personal choices, and competing agendas. It was also to enter a public education system that from the vantage point of the late twentieth century looks all too disappointingly familiar.

For in addition to Cullen's personal teaching materials, the Amistad Collection contains school-board and municipal documents that show how underfunded the Harlem schools were in contrast to other New York City districts; how narrowly obsessed the school system was with standardized testing; and how often teachers in such a system had to serve numerous masters: parents, colleagues, principals, board members, educational philosophers, mayors, et al.

To this complicated matrix, Cullen brought his own complicated background. He was a poet who had gained renown, but with the coming of the Great Depression and the decline of the Harlem Renaissance, he was—as a black poet—a writer for whom renown did not bring its own momentum.

The many teaching materials that have survived tell us much about Cullen's adaptability and courage as a teacher, and much about how a writer's and a teacher's choices converge. One remarkable fact, for instance, is that Cullen's English classes enviably integrated literature, composition, and creative writing—even as they had to

pretend to satisfy the school board's bizarre demands, which included teaching grammar, academic-essay development, marketable skills, and canonical literature in one fell swoop. (Sound familiar?)

Cullen's plan books show that he negotiated these almost-impossible circumstances and created an integrated writing class using two key pedagogical moves. First, he always adapted—one might even say deconstructed—received curricular edicts. To sift through the materials is to observe a teacher absorbing and transforming exterior strictures of the educational environment, a teacher making the material his (in this case) own. Second, he centered most of his choices on students, their aptitudes, conditions, and interests—a concept that remains radical and threatening to this day because of its breathtaking simplicity and practicality. That is, he wanted to make the students' education their own--wanted them to "inhabit" it the way Cullen, at his best, inhabited the institution of lyric poetry he chose to join.

For example, a plan book from early in his career (February 1935) shows him struggling to adapt the requirement of teaching "practical" writing. First he decides to have the class write "a letter ordering a magazine." Then he decides to have them write "a friendly letter on "My Ambition In Life". A strange assignment? Well, yes—but the method of Cullen's madness begins to emerge, especially in the adverb "friendly," which the middle-schoolers would have understood, and which would have implicitly introduced ideas of audience and the writer's self. The adverb encodes a deceptively sophisticated rhetorical move.

A month later, faced with task of teaching such wildly different literary pieces as "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and "The Celebrated Jumping Frog . . .." Cullen becomes even more student-centered: On March 8 he decides to have the students "write a letter to a friend telling what interested you in the A.M. ["Ancient Mariner"]." By December 3, he's having them write "stories my mother and father tell of us children," an assignment that seems to mix narrative, fiction, autobiography, ethnography—perhaps even a little folklore.

For a ninth-grade composition class in the early 1940s, Cullen integrated poetry-writing, autobiography, the notion of a "thing poem," the notion of a monologue, reading, speaking, and revision. Here is his note:

> "Class 9A(2) Composition
>
> Theme: Original verse: subject: Identify yourself with your favorite toy, and write a poem in which the toy speaks.
>
> Treatment: Class discussion, poems written at home--brought in, read, corrected, re-written. (Box 11, File 13, Amistad)

Naturally, the word "toy" seems a little dated in the context of a ninth-grade class, at least from the vantage point of the late twentieth century, when ninth graders seem more jaded than Philip Marlowe. But otherwise, the assignment seems remarkably current and progressive, using creative writing in a composition class, embodying a student-centered approach, staying attentive to revision, and above all integrating a variety of elements in a rhetorical situation. Here are some lines from student Luke Ramsey's poem, "My Ball Speaks":

> I am the one, who takes the beating,
> Because I'm bounced, all over the place.
> I sometimes can have my revenge on them
> By knocking them right in the face.

What a nice surprise--of a male, middle-school sort--there in the last line. Notice, too, how Luke is working with and hearing the rhythm within the rhythm; his ear tells him to put in commas in the first half of the quatrain to slow down the lines. And it seems that Luke is able to transcend the exercise and inhabit the form by bringing forth an image he knows well: having the basketball bounce unpredictably. The autobiographical element empowers him, one might say--gives him room to maneuver.

Here are lines from Harold Killough's poem, "The Train":

> My name it is Electric Train.
> In the house always, sunshine or rain.
> I don't have a bit of fun.
> All I do is run and run.

There is an interesting empathetic move here; Harold sees something of Sisyphus in the train, chooses not to see the train as his toy anymore.

Two years later, Cullen puts a historical spin on the assignment, having students write poems on such figures as Lincoln and Douglass. Notice the hint of Rap and Hip-Hop in the lines from James Boffman's "Lincoln and Douglass":

> Lincoln was needy for advice, Douglass' counsel he sought.
> Wisdom and guidance is what Douglass brought.

Is poetry appropriate for a compositon class? (For a particurlary illuminating recent discussion of composition "versus" literature, see Lindemann.) In the way Cullen uses it, it seems to have been. He offers an avenue by which students can come to own the poem; he uses the assignment to access issues of voice, revision, and precision. Are the assignments too labyrinthine--Rube Goldberg conconctions? A fair question, though Cullen did seem to know what his students could and could not achieve, and he seemed almost always to think through the purposes of assignments, and to construct them in ways that did not bewilder the students. (Would that we had videotapes of his oral, in-class elaborations on the assignments.) All in all, the level of integration and improvisation Cullen achieves remains enviable. After some fifty years, the worth and inherent logic of such assignments endure. Will our teaching materials hold up as well after fifty years?!

Nonetheless, Cullen could not fight City Hall, as it were. He could not make the funding fairer, the classes smaller, racism less monolithic, or educational standards less surreal. But he could and did create productive pedagogical zones for his students. Moreover—and here is a crucial point—he did so through innovative writing assignments, the existence of which one could not have predicted based on the implicit ethos of Cullen's own writing, an ethos this essay provisionally labeled "conservative" earlier.

One way to interpret this unpredictability, I think, is not to say that Cullen the teacher and Cullen the writer were two different entities (a self-defeating reliance on a tired dualism), but rather to say that Cullen the writer recognized all too well how marginalized his students were and created pedagogical spaces for them which were rarely if ever created for him. This interpretation assumes a fair amount of empathy on Cullen's part.

This is a good place, then, to discuss a telling bit of evidence about Cullen the student, evidence which applies to the "empathy" argument. Among the Amistad Center materials is a graduate paper Cullen wrote for Irving Babbitt during a brief stint at Harvard: "Walter Pater as a Romantic Critic." It is an accomplished piece of criticism, notable in part for the maturity of its argument, its understanding of romantic poetics, and its confident prose style. Professor Babbitt gave it an A-, with this comment:

"A good formulation of Pater from a distinctly modernistic point of view. The best corrective of your tendency to overestimate Pater would be to build up your background (Aristotle's Poetics, etc.)."

This is a quintessentially aloof, unhelpful response to Cullen's essay, of course. Aside from two words ("good formulation"), in fact, it is not a response to Cullen's writing but a kind of express delivery of hidden agendas and coded messages: You like Pater too much. You aren't aloof enough in your rhetorical stance. You have not read what I have read. What about Aristotle, what about Aristotle? Your "background" is lacking. Whereas Cullen's middle-school strategy is to give students power and create pedagogical space, Babbitt's university strategy is to close almost every door along the corridor. His comment isn't exactly mean or bullying; he closes the doors gently. Nonetheless, they are shut and locked. For the strategy of his teacher's discourse (shifting metaphors now) is to circumvent the piece of Cullen's writing before him and, in a way, to force Cullen to fight a rear-guard action concerning excessive enthusiasm, modernist tendencies, and "background," that loaded term.

After leaving Harvard upon receiving his M.A., after seeing the socioeconomic foundation of the Harlem Renaissance get wiped out by the Great Depression, after seeing his early literary fame bear meagre fruit, did Cullen rush to Frederick Douglass Middle School determined to become Irving Babbitt's pedagogical opposite? No, it's not that simple, of course. On the other hand, his lack of power as a student and a writer must have been palpable to Cullen in a variety of ways, large and small. And the abundant evidence of how he operated as a teacher tells us that he chose not to visit the sins of the dominant culture on the sons and daughters of a marginalized one.

V. All well and good, but what does Countee Cullen in Harlem have to do with us—the M.A.'s, the M.F.A.'s, the Ph.D's of contemporary North America, the citizens of CCCC, MLA, NCTE, and AWP, the teachers of College Writing in its many forms? Let me count a few of the ways.

1. The example of Cullen gives us a different, more realistic, and therefore more useful model of the writer/teacher from the one that has dominated our professional consciousness since World War Two. This dominant model is that of the writer-in-residence, the writer who has "made it" (whatever that means, and it has usually meant a book or a prize or some other cultural anointing) and on the basis of making it is invited to teach at a college, except that the teaching is usually accompanied by a wink and a nod. Cullen, a black writer in Great Depression America, couldn't "make it" in the usual sense. For black writers, early success did not predict later security. For Cullen, publishing books and winning prizes and even attending Harvard didn't pay off as it might have if he had been white. Therefore, when he taught, he really did teach: every day, all day, at a school in impoverished Harlem. He taught in ways significantly different from the way most well-published writers-in-residence of his and subsequent generations taught. He taught to a markedly different set of students in a markedly different set of socioeconomic circumstances.

   For almost all of the writer-teachers or teacher-writers currently making the transition from M.F.A. or Ph.D programs to college jobs, Cullen's experience is much closer to reality than the experience, for example, of John Ciardi, Randall Jarrell, or Karl Shapiro, to choose writers associated with the 1940's and 1950's; and it is closer to reality than that of a shrinking handful of famous writers in residence, such as Rita Dove or Gary Snyder.

Cullen embraced his circumstances with pedagogical creativity, quiet subversiveness, and not a little productive empathy for the disempowered. That is to say, he confronted and made use of a rather brutal fact: He had more in common with the students of Frederick Douglass School than he did with Irving Babbitt or Ernest Hemingway. He did not deny the fact. To reiterate a point made early in the essay, "reading" Cullen's teaching in this way helps us productively complicate our reading of Cullen's poetry; it adds texture and complexity to comparisons between his work and that of Hughes, for instance. It does so not in the usual way biography informs a writer's literary work, but in distinct ways that concern literacy as negotiation, literacy as power, teaching as power. Put another way, seeing how Cullen helped middle-schoolers negotiate writing may well demystify different ways Cullen negotiated his own writing and inscribed himself on traditions of lyric poetry.

2. When Cullen wasn't just trying to get by from day to day, he was trying to confront the socioeconomic injustice that was killing Harlem and its schools. The literary conservative was, at the very least, an educational progressive, perhaps even a radical. Labels aside, he confronted questions of power and injustice.

   We teacher-writers and writer-teachers should continue to help each other to do the same. How well are M.F.A. programs equipping their graduates for the real work of teaching that these graduates will do? What are MFA and PH.D. programs doing about the horrendous job market in English? How well is the Associated Writing Programs looking after the interests of students? Why do such hard barriers exist between M.F.A., Ph.D.-literature, and Ph.D.-rhetoric students when almost all of them will end up with jobs that include the teaching of first-year writing? And so on.

3. To paraphrase the bandits in "Treasure of Sierra Madre," Cullen didn't need no stinking genre boundaries. Poetry, essays, stories, autobiography, cumulative sentences, sentence combining, letters, prosody excercises, parody exercises: the students of Frederick Douglass School wrote it all. Cullen's class was a great Cajun gumbo of genres. Although virtually all of the theoretical, pedagogical and practical evidence suggests that our classrooms should be the same, our curricula remain excessively genre-bound. Ph.D. students write "papers"; MFA students write stories and poems; the deans running the show write memos. Instead, everybody should be writing everything, particularly at the undergraduate level, but also in graduate programs. MFA students should write nonfiction prose about teaching and theory. Ph.D. students (and deans) should write poems and stories.

   A broader, related point is worth emphasizing here. It is that Cullen's maneuvers within a literary tradition are parallel to maneuvers his students made within an educational tradition. Cullen's pedagogical strategies highlight this parallelism for us: Cullen the teacher enables his students to negotiate genres in the same way Cullen the poet negotiates (in "Saturday's Child," for instance) genres of lyric poetry he has received from the Tradition. To put the matter in even broader terms, pedagogy can be seen--ought to be seen--as a vibrant site where writers', students', teachers', and theorists' notions of genre and genre-mastery converge and often collide. Pedagogy "reads" genre and struggles of genre-power in ways we should not neglect--as theorists, as writers, as teachers, as hybrid entities combining all three roles.

4. As noted earlier, real and apparent differences exist between Cullen the writer and Cullen the teacher. Such differences exist for us all: Perhaps we give ourselves advice about writing that is completely different from the advice we give students. Perhaps, as MFA students (for example), we take one sort of course in the afternoon and then teach one the next day that is based on completely different pedagogical

assumptions. Just as knowing Cullen's teaching enriches our knowledge of his writing and of issues central to the Harlem Renaissance, exploring the commonalities and conflicts between our own teaching and writing can only enrich us. Probably all graduate students in writing, rhetoric, and literature should keep ethnographic journals or do other sorts of writing that explicitly integrate their experiences as writers, students, teachers, and theorists—as well as parents, workers, spouses, and whatever. That is to say, we need to address not just issues of power but also the insidious compartmentalization of genres, subject matter, and the often alienated, competing roles of writer, student, and teacher.

VI. Teaching rewrites the writer. It complicates a writers' relationship(s) to genre in general and genres in particular. Studying the teaching of a writer who taught rewrites our notions of the writer, of his or her writing, of his or her maneuvers within traditions of genre. Teaching should be seen as part of the whole, in our lives and work and in the lives and work of writers who came before us. Teaching is a site and a text, not just a job. It enacts theory and exposes contradictions--if we allow it to do so. These are some of the issues Countee Cullen the teacher has helped me consider.

I think the teaching histories of countless other writers can do the same for other teachers of writing and writers who teach. Such teaching histories should become more greatly accepted sites of research for graduate students of creative writing, rhetoric, and literature. By reintegrating teaching histories into ongoing professional inquiry, we are more likely to integrate pedagogy into literary history and genre-theory. We are more likely to integrate teaching, writing, and learning in our own lives. Countee Cullen in Harlem was a kind of unwitting beacon for this sort of work.

Also, in English-studies graduate programs of every stripe, courses should integrate varieties of writing, varieties of genre. Graduate students just embarking on their teaching careers should write about that teaching in a variety of ways, should present that writing or ideas from it in their seminars and workshops, should be encouraged to conduct meta-analysis of their double and triple lives as writers, teachers, and students, tearing down boundaries and dried-up dualisms between theory and practice, "TA-ing" and studying, writing and teaching, and so forth. What was good for Countee Cullen's Harlem ninth graders could be excellent for our own graduate programs, where issues of power, ownership, masters and apprentices, discourse codes, "background," and hidden agendas are everywhere. As a socioeconomic site and as a crucible of competing discourses, pedgagoy is every bit as complex and influential as publishing, but mostly it is not treated as such. The same theoretical models that have helped us examine genres in relation to publishing, canon formation, and discourse communities (feminism, new historicism, social-constructionist rhetorical theory, multiculturalism, and so on) can help us examine genres in relation to pedagogy; in relation to the pedagogical histories of writer-teachers; in relation to ethnographies and self-studies of teachers; and in relation to pedagogy's attendant issues of power, discourse, silence, and reinscription. Elsewhere in this volume, Allison Giffen refers to genre as a "kinetic site." We might profitably depict pedagogy in similar terms--that is, as a place with its own integrity, its own identity; as a place with stories to tell about writers who teach and teachers who write.

To a degree, then, this consideration of Cullen is meant to be a way of showing how the invisible (a teaching-history) can be made visible, can be interpreted, can open up other dimensions. To teach is to create a work; it is to work within, and to inscribe oneself upon, genres of pedagogy.

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Bio Bodies

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"WARNING, enter at your own risk." "BEWARE, BIO BODIES." "Invasion of the BIO BODIES." The determined visitor stopped outside my classroom, read the warnings plastered on the door, and peeked inside. "What's going on here?" he stammered. I looked up from my kneeling position beside a prone student, felt tip marker poised, and followed his confounded gaze across the room. The floor was littered with eighth graders lying on large sheets of colored paper. Others hovered over frozen figures carefully tracing the outlines with black marking pens. A threesome sat cross-legged in the corner cutting out magazine pictures; four others busily hacked away at the traced lines of their bodies. It resembled a quirky mass murder scene.

"We're creating a community," I enthused. I pulled out my copy of *Living Between the Lines* and quoted these lines, "Our students need what readers and writers the world over need . . . they need to feel at home. They need to feel safe and respected and free to be themselves" (Calkins and Harwayne 27). "Come back in a week and see the finished product. My students will be explaining the importance of their BIO BODIES then." After that quick explanation, our visitor left smiling and satisfied with an invitation to return for the finished BIO BODY presentation.

The BIO BODY project is an innovation I gleaned from several other sources and adapted throughout the years. This project transforms our classroom into a trusting community and provides students with rich sources of inspiration for their writing. It's simple and requires a minimum of materials.

Materials Needed

- large (six feet long, three feet wide) sheets of paper
- felt tip markers
- magazines
- scissors
- glue
- paint, glitter, and buttons are optional

First, I gather sheets of colored paper, enough for every student in the class. Then I post big signs on the class door so that passersby know that something special is going on. My students walk in surprised and curious, already anticipating a unique activity. I explain that the BIO BODIES are their bodies, with their stories, their memories, and their history. The students decide what should be included and what they'd prefer to leave out in their biographical stories.

After deciding on a pose that is meaningful to them, students lie on the paper striking that pose. I usually trace their outlines, which allows me to get close to them, and invade their space in a non-threatening way. One boy who ran cross country track positioned himself in a runner's stance. A junior varsity cheerleader chose to twist her body into a hurkey (a bent knee jump). Another sports fan feigned shooting

a basketball by stretching his arms over his head. The poses are as individual as the students themselves.

The students then cut out their body outlines and work on making them biographical. Students paint, color, and cut and paste their life in pictures onto the body. Since I require the entire surface of the body be utilized, pictures of student hobbies, activities, special memories, pets, family members, and major events are all included. The BIO BODY should then be immediately identifiable as a distinct representation of the student.

When the BIO BODIES are complete, I give everyone a large cartoon-like dialogue bubble with instructions to sum up their philosophy of life in a sentence or two and write it in the bubble. The finished BIO BODIES spouting life philosophies are hung all around the room, and the classroom comes alive with life-size paper personalities. Teachers and students delight in visiting the BIO BODY gallery and identifying the subjects. My students feel validated as important people, something adolescents frequently lack. Then we share our stories (Calkins 27) because "shared stories can build communities, change relationships, and get students caring about one another." (Harwayne 9).

I ask students to think about what has shaped them as individuals and who has influenced them. I want them to discover who they are and how they became that person. They probe deeply for their beliefs and values. Probst asserts that one of the six goals for literature and writing instruction is that "Students will learn about themselves." He writes that this goal should shape and lead curriculum and instruction (39).

Students then explain the importance and meaning behind each picture glued to their BIO BODY in a five to ten minute presentation they address to the class. This is the time we learn to trust and accept each other. It is a time for self revelation and realization. We learn about divorced parents, friendships, hurts, loves and disappointments. We hear about the deaths of grandparents and pets. We listen with respect and learn we are all alike.

I am constantly amazed at what students reveal about themselves. One girl, known for discipline problems and frequent suspensions glued a large picture of baby pacifier over her BIO BODY's mouth. She explained that she tended to have a big mouth and it frequently got her in trouble. The pacifier, she hoped, would serve as a reminder to think before she spoke.

This type of honest, evaluative self-reflection would certainly not be possible without the sense of community fostered by sharing our stories and making connections as people. Collaborative efforts, conferencing, and honest writing are vital to middle school language arts classes, yet can be so difficult to achieve.

> Students need trusting classroom relationships so they can serve as an audience for one another, and so they will want to write for each other. Teachers of students from sixth grade up often observe that kids hesitate to share work in class and want only the teacher to read what they have written, thereby cutting themselves off from the larger community, a vital source of ideas, support, and feedback. (Zemelman and Daniels 53)

Because I display the BIO BODIES on our walls for several months, they also serve as an ongoing source of inspiration for writing. Whenever students seem stuck and devoid of ideas for a new topic, all I have to do is point their attention to their BIO BODIES. Their life stories and memories represented in drawings and magazine photographs are tangible reminders that they have many stories to tell. Calkins believes that "writing matters the most when it is personal and when it is interpersonal" (14). Because they have pictured their stories, they can write about

them. These are the seeds from which their writings sprout (74). They feel compelled to capture their thoughts on paper and translate those pictures into words. Soon, students are writing anecdotes and memoirs. "In writing memoir, we select moments that reveal our won experiences of our lives. My emphasis is on two words, *select* and *reveal*" (Calkins 407). The trust we fostered with the sharing of our BIO BODIES serves as a security blanket for students to reveal themselves and their subjects in their writing.

Here is where they explore their past and find meaning in the present. As adolescents struggling to discover who they are, they find themselves in their writing (Newkirk and Atwell 167). Calkins reminds us "that it is by looking back that we create our lives, our selves (400). Memoir and anecdotal writings soon advance to autobiographies. The need to express the significance of their lives pushes them to make decisions about content, tone, and organization. In her autobiography, Becky Ford chose to unify her writing with the image of candy. She begins:

> I sat on the steps of my door and watched my dog, Buddy, peacefully sleeping on the green and brown grass in the bright, warm sunshine. A plastic bowl of valentine candy sat on the other side of the brick step. As I ate some of the candy, I thought of how my growing up seemed so much like the bowl of assorted candy that sat next to me.
>
> I picked up a miniature Hershey bar, unwrapped it and took a bite. The sweet chocolate reminded me of my childhood, especially the birthday parties. I can still smell the burning wax of the four baby blue candles on the Dukes of Hazard cake and hear the voices of the small children laughing and singing "Happy Birthday". The taste of vanilla ice cream and chocolate cake still linger on my tongue.

Finally, after the BIO BODIES, memoirs, anecdotes and autobiographies have all been completed, I ask the students to evaluate the project. I encourage them to think about and respond to several criteria:

- The process involved
- Their self discovery
- Their strengths as writers
- Their overall evaluations of the project

Another student, Kristin Asleson writes:

> I think I know myself pretty well, and conveyed that to the reader. I know where I have been and what I want to do. I have learned a lot about myself. I had to look back at all the memories and pick only the ones most special to me. I really like my autobiography because in years to come I can look back on this and remember all the times I have written about. When I get older my view of life will probably change, and it will be interesting to see what I thought was a mortifying experience at nine years of age might be hysterically funny at nineteen. Overall, this is my all-time favorite writing from your class.

Ryan Cooper's evaluation outlines the strengths in his autobiography and mentions an underlying fear of every writer- that of being misunderstood. His misgivings and self-doubt seem to dissolve with the last few lines as he comes to a better understanding of himself as a person.

> I think that I did a very good job sustaining my metaphor throughout the piece. I also think that I did a good job with the anecdotes. The major problem that I encountered with this piece of writing was that I couldn't think of how to put my life into words. I was afraid that someone might misinterpret my life. I wanted to show people what a wonderful life I have had. I wanted to show them that I have had a great time living. I also learned about myself. Sometimes we forget the past. By remembering the good and bad times, I learned that I really have changed since I was two and watching Sesame Street.

Lucy Calkins issues a dire warning: "We cannot write well if we are afraid to put ourselves on the page. We cannot write well if we are afraid to let our individual voice stand out from other voices" (143). If we, as teachers, take time to foster a caring, trusting atmosphere in our classrooms, if we encourage and promote tentative writers, we will reap the benefits of student success.

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Responding to Creative Writing: Students-as-Teachers and the Executive Summary

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When I teach introductory poetry courses, we write into and out of forms in order to generate ideas and text. My students produce many poems, more than I can respond to personally. Yet my students crave such a response on every draft, despite my careful use of small and large peer response groups. And, even if I could respond to every draft, I often find that my over-full, over-educated response can appear too critical, and overwhelm the exploratory impulse in student work. This situation is true of any introductory creative writing workshop, organized to explore a single genre or genres broadly. Students in these courses are learning to become better writers, but they also need to become better readers of professional and student texts. I believe they do this by learning to respond to their own work, carefully, making use of peer and teacher responses to take that work through revisions.

The response activities I share in this essay developed out of my own need to explore the arena of "response to creative writing" in general. Unlike teachers and researchers in composition, creative writers have, in general, spent much more time on canon formation (creating anthologies) and discussions of technique and craft (creating guides that develop rules and prescriptions) than they have on the equally important issues of response and evaluation. That doesn't surprise me, since responding to beginning texts is difficult, and evaluation of student writing is rarely a pleasurable activity for the dedicated writing teacher.

To address these concerns, I've asked creative writers to take a teacher's role vis-à-vis their texts, in order to:

1. highlight some of what these students already know about their texts,
2. gain insights into the drafting choices they are making intentionally, and
3. put myself into an ally's position, agreeing or disagreeing with or expanding upon what their already internalized self-as-teacher can tell them.

In addition, I've developed an executive summary and revision plan assignment to encourage students to take responsibility for workshop responses. This activity encourages them to make their revisions more mindfully.

Neither of these techniques is an instant panacea, turning beginners into expert practitioners. Still, considering response this way, as a dialogue, allows "learners" some of the free and unjudged space they need to risk real learning and allows me more time to become the student's teacher in the best sense of the word--one who offers invitations into the field.

Students-as-Teachers

Jennifer has just written a poem--an intentional cliché poem, after an in-class invention activity (For more on writing intentionally clichéd texts, see Bishop, Wendy. *Working Words: The Process of Creative Writing.* Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1993. 51-54). Like the other members of the class, she brings five copies to her small group for comments the next day. Before groups form, I ask Jennifer and all the students in class to pretend they are the teacher, to sit down and comment on one copy of their own poem. This is the first publicly shared poem of the term. My students look at me in disbelief.

"What do you mean?"

"Like you will? We don't know how you'll grade."

I don't try to explain but encourage them: "I'm not talking about grading, but reading. Pretend you're a teacher . Write on the text, to the student--you."

Having collected these self-responses while the group members continue to offer each other revision advice, I am in a better response space than I was in former semesters. I don't have to guess from the text what my students know or don't know about contemporary poetry. If they use or abuse techniques, I don't have to imagine that practice-equals-person; instead I hear students-as-teachers offering me insights into what they do know, whether it appears in the text or not.

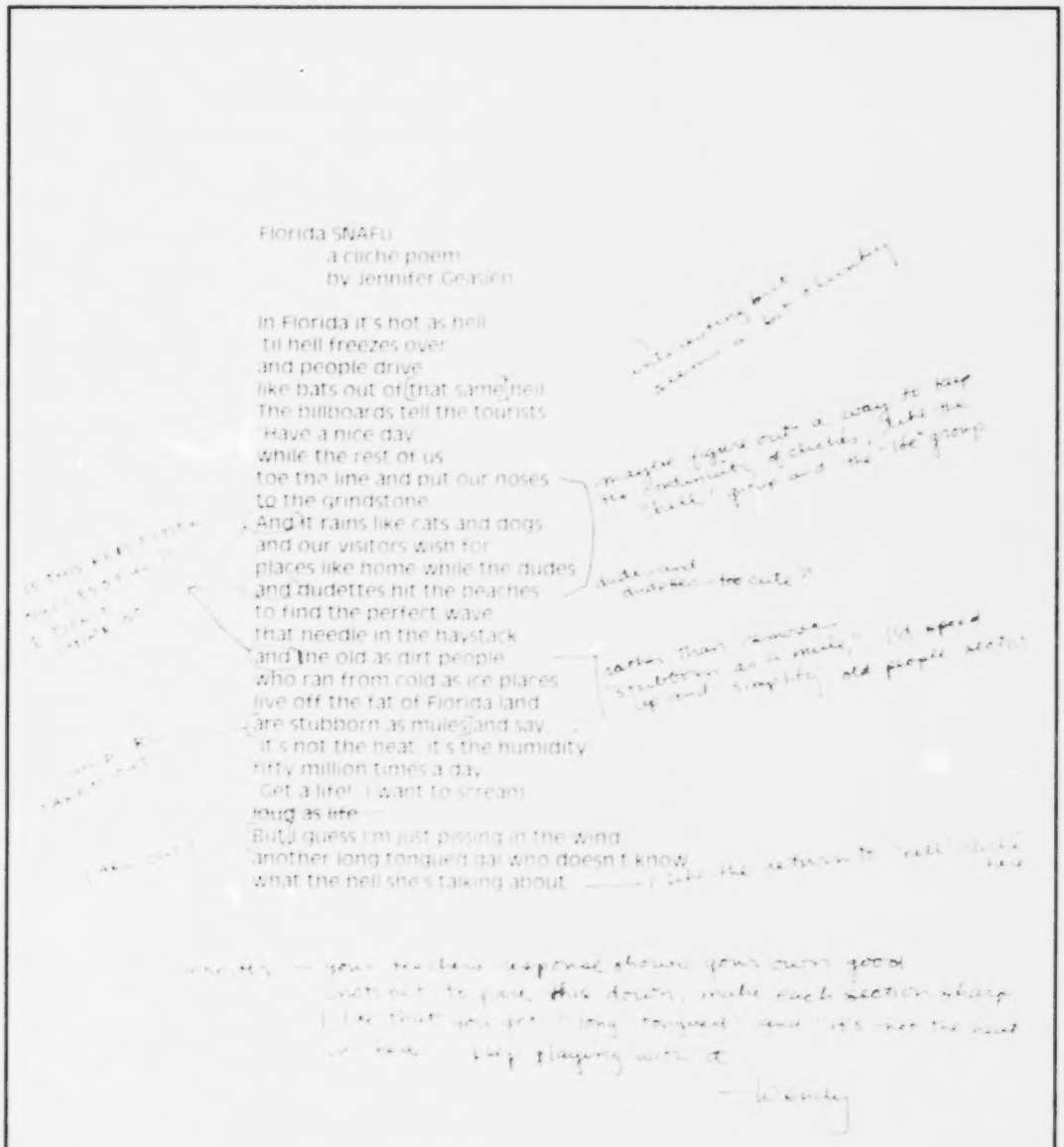
In the left-hand margin of Jennifer's poem (Figure 1), you'll read her self-response. To the right of the poem, you'll find my written reactions: I respond to her responses and place an endnote just below the text.

Jennifer looks at repetition and has ideas for pruning the text. I am able to encourage this--agreeing with her impulse to cut--and tell her what I like. Then I find space to make two major suggestions. In doing this, I do not feel I am overwhelming her poem; rather, I am responding in the spirit of her own "change based" remarks. We are in a dialogue. Jennifer, who was new to writing poems, already had an internalized "teacher's voice" that she could call on to give her ideas for improving her work. She needed a method for accessing this voice. By responding to herself as a teacher, she found out what she already knew.

Matthew (see Figure 2) was an English major with a much stronger grounding in writing and poetry. In his case, a[illegible]g him to be "teacher" revealed his investment in the text he had created. In fact, he wrote enough on his text, including an end comment, that my responses were thoroughly taken up with his. When I asked him to take our dialogue one step farther, writing me a note in response to my response, I learned that it would have done me little good to push for further revision of the poem draft since he felt it was "done," and he backed up this feeling with reasons that he was able to articulate. The handwritten comments are Matthew's own. I've noted my responses at the end of the poem, including an indication of the line I responded to.

When Matthew comments on "dark sweet oblivion" as neat image (a response I don't agree with--since I find it clichéd), I respond to his self-response with: "Doesn't seem the same as the rest of the poem, tonally, though." In saying this, I change my response from judgment (clichéd) to analysis (how the language differs in sections of the poem).

When Matthew comments "not really answered, no change" to the last three lines of the poem, I push against his apparent acceptance of those lines, and incorporate that push in a short end-note, my total response to his detailed self-analysis:



Florida SNAFU
a cliché poem
by Jennifer Geaslen

In Florida it's hot as hell
'til hell freezes over
and people drive
like bats out of that same hell
The billboards tell the tourists
"Have a nice day"
while the rest of us
toe the line and put our noses
to the grindstone
And it rains like cats and dogs
and our visitors wish for
places like home while the dudes
and dudettes hit the beaches
to find the perfect wave
that needle in the haystack
and the old as dirt people
who ran from cold as ice places
live off the fat of Florida land
are stubborn as mules and say
"It's not the heat, it's the humidity"
fifty million times a day
Get a life! I want to scream
snug as life
But I guess I'm just pissing in the wind
another long tongued gal who doesn't know
what the hell she's talking about

Figure 1: Jennifer's Poem

Figure 2: Matthew's poem

"Matthew,
Good observation. Pivotal for the revision of this poem. Are you going to follow your own suggestions? --Wendy"

Matthew's response to my response, for me, highlights the benefits of this student-as-teacher dialogue:

> Well, I have made some changes (I'll submit a copy sometime soon). I agree "dark sweet oblivion" doesn't quite gel with the rest of the language of the piece, **but I like it so much, I'm keeping it as is**. I've made minor corrections (the asides make more sense as interior-monologue commentary). **However my intention *was* for the questions to remain unanswered** - the poem is at best a "temporary epiphany." It also is **not the strongest piece I've ever written** and it is **not important enough to me** to totally deconstruct it (which it would likely take to make it substantially better). So, after these current corrections are reviewed, **I'm finished with it**. (emphasis mine)

Reading our dialogue, I (re)learn lessons that are all too easy to ignore from my "teacher-position" in classroom. Matthew writes because he likes language, so telling him "dark sweet oblivion" is clichéd will be an ineffective act, uselessly challenging his taste and investment. Matthew also makes clear distinctions between his own stronger and weaker work and decides how much revision time is worth the effort. Matthew's remarks let me see that he had been involved to the point of making "corrections" but he knows "revision" will take more time than he's willing to give this poem. To push him would have been a poor use of my teaching time. In fact, he's shown me elements of his learning process that I would hope for from a serious course of study of poetry writing: He can estimate the worth of his own text and the usefulness of exploring further work on it. Together, we should proceed to other poems.

When we respond to poems in the context of a full class workshop, I move to the use of an executive summary since I believe students like Matthew do need to take the time to learn from revision. They can choose which poem to set aside sometimes, but the course is also designed to ask them to push onward with revision at other times.

Writer's Executive Summary and Revision Plan

When a full-class response workshop backfires, it's discouraging. This occurs when students tell me that they received so many contradictory responses they didn't know where to begin revising. Or, writers say they heard one thing from the workshop and I distinctly remember the "message" of our total comments quite differently, or they overvalue my remarks and ignore useful peer comments. Surely, it is a stressful (though beneficial) moment for a writer when twelve to twenty-five peers and a teacher respond to a text.

To produce an executive summary and revision plan, I ask students to take peer responses home, to tabulate those responses, and to write an exploratory paragraph deciding how they plan to use (or ignore) workshop responses in their next draft. I've used this method in many variations--from compiling the responses myself, in order to learn what written comments really appeared on peer texts, to asking students to write executive summaries after small group work and revision plans before they left class, in order not to forget what groups suggested. Currently, I orchestrate a full-group response session in an introductory class in this way:

1. All writers submit a poem with their own most important questions about the poem typed at the bottom. Their questions guide the workshop response.
2. Class members purchase a copy of class poems at a local copy shop, read and annotate the poems, and return to class prepared to discuss the text.
3. The poet reads the poem and we listen.
4. The poet chooses the first respondent. After this, we use a rotating chair model--the last speaker recognizes the next speaker.
5. I do not comment on the poem, instead I make a running transcript of the workshop comments, always finding that just as I'm bursting to comment, another class member will bring up the point I want to make.
6. After our allotted time is over, we return annotated copies of the poem to the poet. I give the poet my workshop transcript.
7. The author takes these comments home, writes up a summary with tabulations (how many respondents said what, in general) and a revision plan.
8. I collect a copy of the executive summary and revision plan. If I wish, I can check off those class comments I most agree with and encourage the poet to follow particular parts of his or her revision plan.
9. The poet revises.
10. I see the revision in the final portfolio unless we have a small group response session devoted to looking at the changes the poet made.

Here is a sample of a revision plan. In this case, the class did not push the writer as far as it might have, but he chooses, through his self-analysis, to push himself. After tabulating responses, Jeff Matthews discusses revisions for his poem "The Wife of Bath."

> The vast majority of class comments on "Wife of Bath" were very positive. Many classmates found my images vivid and commented that they could actually "see" the person I was portraying.
>
> However, the class comments also directed my attention to several "trouble spots" in the poem. Several students had trouble with my use of "Mustang" in lines 5 and 8--they could not tell if I was referring to the horse or to the car. In my revised version, I make it plain that I am comparing the "wife" to the car. A few classmates also saw the word "beriddled" in line 6 as being awkward. I hope "awash" in the revised version flows more effectively. Finally punctuation was called for to clear up confusion between the lines. I followed the advice.
>
> On the other hand, several students had problems with lines, that, in my mind, were not trouble spots. The narrator's point of view seemed unclear to some people. This problem surfaced in lines 1 and 10. In line 1 there was confusion as to whom the "my" was referring. The "my" was referring to the narrator who was creating a portrait of the "wife." Just because the narrator does not refer to himself again in the poem, it does not mean that "my" was a typo or that his point of view is not present in the rest of the poem. Finally, many classmates felt that the last line did not fit with the rest of the poem and that it should be dropped. While I admit that it does not seem akin in nature to the other

lines, I believe that it is a great line, nonetheless, and I refuse to delete it.

Jeff, like many students writing revision plans, has actually jumped in and written the revision and is narrating both his plans and what he did and what he felt the results were. I don't mind when this happens, since planning and doing are so interwoven for most writers. And, as in Matthew Gandy's student-as-teacher response, shared above, Jeff has clearly indicated where he feels flexible and inflexible in the revision process. I find these discussions invaluable when a poet like Jeff comes for a conference about his poem. Instead of pushing on him to drop or change the last line, as I might have formerly, I can ask him to explore his investment in it--together we can talk about important issues like what--to this writer--constitutes a "great line" and why he feels his poems need to end with such a line even when the line "does not seem akin in nature to the other lines."

For me, broadening response options through student-as-teacher and executive summary activities, performs two invaluable acts. Each activity encourages writer autonomy, authority, and ownership of a text and each puts the writer and me into a profitable dialogue about writing. At the same time, I find responding to creative texts more pleasurable since I'm in the position of agreeing or disagreeing or further exploring writers' stated positions rather than having to create those positions for them. No longer do I have to "invent" each writer, a heavy duty, indeed, for the writing teacher. Instead, I help the writers revise their developing personas and processes. I'm guessing there are many more ways to respond creatively to creative writing, and I'm eager to spend time finding them, for, as my students become better readers, I become a better--and happier--reader too.

"What's the Use of Stories That Aren't True?" A Composition Teacher Reads Creative Writing

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> Writing a poem was one of my goals for the semester. I may not be a poet, but I won't be afraid to try this again.
>
> --Margaret, final portfolio, 10 December 1994

> I fear [Haroun] is too much like the folks of this foolish valley--crazy for make believe.
>
> --Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 1990

Salman Rushdie's first publication since *The Satanic Verses* and the resulting death threat imposed on him by the Ayatollah in Iran is *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, a fantasy novel centered around the question, "What's the use of stories that aren't true?" In this novel, a young boy journeys from his own land where "sadness was actually manufactured" in mighty factories, across the Ocean of the Streams of Stories in order to restore the gift of story-telling to his father. In the process, he saves the Streams of Stories, threatened with pollution by the Chupwallas (quiet ones); in fact, he saves the Chupwallas and his own people of Gup (the gossips), too. As in all good fairy tales, Haroun saves the whole day, the whole world. How? Through stories. Rushdie's latest novel becomes an answer to its initial question: The use of stories that aren't true is that they make things happen in the world and they keep people together in communities. In Austin's sense, stories that aren't true are "performative," changing both tellers and hearers as they are created, revised, retold, remembered. Rushdie's novel is, of course, an allegorical answer to the madmen who are so threatened by his earlier "stories"; it is also a defense and a celebration of the sanity of being "crazy for make believe."

In this essay, I'd like to ask Rushdie's question in a different context. What's the use of stories that aren't true in a composition classroom, a class traditionally devoted to expository writing, to essays that argue, describe, explain, and sometimes, but not primarily, narrate? In composition classes, students traditionally read and write what's "true," using facts, observation, details from "real life" or from texts to advance and support their meaning and their purposes. I would argue, however, that in composition classes, we've always encouraged students, if not to "lie," then certainly to stretch the "truth" in their expository writing; composition teachers, like all English teachers and the folks in the Valley, are also "crazy for make believe." But first, I want to talk about why, over the last several years, I've not worried so much about generic distinctions between expository writing and stories in the first place.

Perhaps I should begin also by saying that I am a composition specialist, trained in a composition (not a literature) Ph.D. program, working in a large and highly specialized English department. I do not primarily teach literature courses or literary texts, although reading good writing, including literature, is a part of every course I teach. Perhaps I should also admit that, except for the occasional verse in honor of my mother and children, I am not a creative writer. But I do write a lot, every day, every week. I would like to think that much of my work is "creative," that at least some of it provides the kind of pleasure I

associate with reading stories, novels, and poems. And I came into this profession largely because I was also crazy for stories.

I don't want to get defensive here; although, as Joseph Moxley says, the "walls" between composition and "creative" writing are "not easily scaled," it's also commonplace for discussions like this one to being with axiomatic statements about how "all writing is creative," and how distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, for example, are arbitrary. That's more true in some places than in others; in the middle and secondary level writing classes described by Lucy Calkins, Nancie Atwell, and Linda Rief, students are encouraged to write without regard to genre. The writing itself is the point. But higher up in the educational systems, the more specialized and categorized our thinking about writing becomes, and genres of reading, as well as genres of writing, are divided into separate areas of study, where, as Moxley says, the walls between creative, critical, and composition writing are high.

This essay is about facing the walls between creative writing and composition, and rather than scaling them, taking the long way around, with a different destination in mind. I want to describe here how I came to learn that the generic distinctions among essay, poem, and story are indeed real, and useful, but also how I learned to blur, even ignore, those distinctions in order to help my students write more confidently and creatively, in whatever genre.' This essay is primarily about learning to respond to students' writing, to think and to read across boundaries, to adapt to my students' own reasons for writing rather than my own.

My goals as a writing teacher have shifted, to put it simply, from a focus on texts that my students write toward the students-as-writers. That does not mean that I ignore quality of student writing: but it does mean that I am least interested in the genre of that writing. It means more to me, for example, that Margaret in the excerpt above, will write another poem than if she had written ten well-organized essays that she would never return to again.

The Writing Workshop: Students Choose Their Own Stories

> I picked this story because it's the first thing that I started for me, not because I had to write it for a class.
>
> --John, final portfolio, 10 December 1994

> "Where do stories come from?" [Haroun asked his father]. "From the great Story Sea," he'd reply. "I drink the warm Story Waters and then I feel full of steam . . . . It comes out of an invisible Tap installed by one of the Water Genies. You have to be a subscriber."
>
> --Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 1990

The above excerpt from a final portfolio of writing from one of my last semester's classes reflects one of the most important principles of my teaching, that of choice. John "picked" the story he's referring to as part of his final portfolio section entitled "Best Edited Writing." This principle of choice, and its attendant responsibility for one's own writing, has become a central feature of all my writing classes. Several years ago, I changed my composition classes to composition workshops. I believe, with Berthoff, that naming is a powerful act of mind, and the title "Workshop" marks a tremendous change in focus for my students, their work, and mine.

Teachers like Lucky Calkins, Nancie Atwell, and Linda Rief have taught me the basic principles of writing workshops: (1) writers need time to write; (2) writers need to choose and be responsible for their own topics, forms, purposes for writing; (3) writers need responses to their writing in process; and (4) writers need opportunities to publish their writing for real readers. I won't dwell on each of these principles; the second one, about choice and responsibility, seems key to me, and it's resulted in this far-reaching change in

my writing classes: I no longer assign topics, forms or reasons for writing to my students. I do all that I can to help them figure out what they want and need to write about, through many, many invention activities, and, through responses to drafts from me and other writers, students also have opportunities to discover and experiment with the forms of their ideas. Berthoff tells me that learning, first of all, is a "disposition to form structures," and that teaching composition

> by arbitrarily setting topics and then concentrating on the mechanics of expression does not guarantee that students will learn to write competently, and it certainly does not encourage the discovery of language either as an instrument of knowing or as our chief means of shaping and communicating ideas and experience. (19)

In my workshop, then, students start the process of discovery and knowing by choosing their own topics and forms for writing.

And given a choice, many of my students choose to write fiction or poetry, two genres I regularly banned from my composition classes for years, telling students that our department has courses and professors devoted exclusively to fiction and poetry and that's where they belonged if they wanted to write in those genres. *Mine* was a composition course in expository writing. However, as one decision leads to another, and as walls once cracked do come tumbling down, I began to realize how very silly, arbitrary, and controlling my prohibition against creative writing was. If I change my focus from the writing to the writer, from text to author, I find that genre does not matter as much as I once thought it did. If my goal in a composition course is to help students find reasons to write, to see the place of writing in their lives, both personally and professionally, then I find that genre becomes much less important. Instead of my having an Ideal Text in mind as students write, and measuring their papers against that standard, I now respond more like a reader, giving myself over to the writer's Ideal Text, letting the writer tell me what her goals are for a given draft at a given time in the course.

Changes lead to more changes, as any writer or teacher knows. When my students stopped writing according to my agendas, I realized that I could not read or respond to their texts in my old ways either.[1] Since I had not assigned the topic, the form or the reason for writing, I did not have an easy, pre-set way into my students' drafts, a basis from which to respond, to tell them what I thought. I was reading in a vacuum and making vacuous comments. So, now I insist that every draft be accompanied by an "author's note," where students describe the genesis of the draft, their reasons for writing it, the effects they are aiming for, what they like the best about the draft so far, what they like the least, and what specific questions they would like a reader to answer or what specific parts they would like a reader to respond to, and why, and how. These authors' notes serve both writers and readers. For writers, they serve as a time and space from which to critically read, and re-read, and plan; often I find that students figure out what's wrong, how to fix it, and where to go next in their author's note, making my job as responder one of simply reinforcing what they already know. For readers, authors' notes provide an entry to a draft, a way to begin to read, and a blueprint for response. Instead of responding to a student text as an exercise in meeting my standards, my notions of why they should be writing and what "college writing" should be, I must now respond to particular texts in terms of the particular questions the author has asked, in terms of the students' agendas. All of them are "subscribers" to the Streams of Stories; and my responsibility for reading locally mirrors my students' responsibility to tell me, in their authors' notes, what their stories mean to them, and what they want them to mean to a reader.

And yet, it's not always easy to respond to the variety of texts my students write each week. Sometimes I'm at a loss, and I admit I find myself mute more often in front of poetry and fiction than essay, probably because I've been trained to read exposition critically and because I read fiction and poetry for pleasure. Sometimes I don't know what

to say about a story that doesn't move me or a poem that I think is really pretty bad. Then, I have to remember that the form is less important than the forming. The next section of this essay will describe how I read and responded to three students in my 400 level composition Theory and Practice course last semester, a course in writing and writing theory for Education majors in the semester before they begin their student teaching. My overall goal in this course is to create the kind of writing workshop I would like these future teachers to run in their own classrooms; therefore, our focus is on their own writing, and I'm less interested in what they write than in *that* they write, less interested in the form than that they recognize the forming power of their own ideas and language, less concerned that John, for example, write for an "academic," invisible audience than that he understand, find and create his own readership.

Managing Responses: Does It Feel Like *Star Trek*?

> There is a little more pressure on myself, because this is getting into what I really want to write. So, I'm more worried about getting it right. Will it draw the reader in? Is the action effective, or does it drag? Does it feel like *Star Trek*?
>
> --John, author's note on draft, 18 November 1995

> Any story worth its salt can handle a little shaking up.
>
> --Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 1990

In his first journal to me, John told me that he wanted to be an author. A secondary education major, John loves to read but also wants to write and write a lot:

> I want to write, and feel compelled to do so. My goal is to become an author. However, so far, I haven't done much writing. I've read a few how-to books, and last semester I took a fiction writing class. My problem is motivational. I like to read and often do so when I could be writing. Staying current with what is being published is beneficial for an author wannabe. (At least that sounds good; basically, I just like to read.) Then, again, I think part of the problem is time. It's hard to find the energy to be creative when one is: a husband, a student, working a part-time job, in the National Guard. I am planning to use the required writing assignments for this class as a good excuse to get some writing done. (John, Journal, 28 August 1994)

When John realized that the only "required writing assignments" were drafts due every other week, he immediately chose to write a *Star Trek* short story. ("I hope you are tolerant of science fiction," he told me in his next journal.) One of his goals is to write a *Star Trek* novel, and he wrote his story "To get used to writing in the *Star Trek* universe, as this is where my first novel will be set" (Journal, 28 September 1994). The first draft of this story began:

> **Captain's Log: Stardate 4419.5**
>
> **The U.S.S. *Republic* has arrived on station at the Klingon Neutral Zone. The *Republic* will spend the next month patrolling this area. All ship systems are functioning normally.**
>
> Captain Willard R. Decker pressed the button that ended his log entry, and leaned back in the command chair. Things had been quiet along

the Klingon Neutral Zone lately. However, Decker knew that was no reason to let his guard down. Command was a test, and the price of failure was all too often high.

Naturally, trouble soon surfaces in this quiet setting, and the story revolves around Captain Decker's command decisions as the *Republic* responds to a distress call inside the Neutral Zone, an attack by the Klingons, and Decker's decision to destroy his ship rather than be captured. At the end of the story, we find that this has been only a test, a simulation as part of Mr. Decker's training as a Star Fleet officer. Decker's "lesson" is that there's no fail-safe solution for real life.

In his author's note on the first draft, John told his readers that he "realizes this draft is very rough":

> I know it needs a lot of work. In general, the story needs to be tightened up. I had originally planned to have Decker deal with his father's death, and the loss of his crew. After I finished this draft, I realized that these things don't happen to his father until six years after he graduates from the academy. So I am planning to change the emotional component of the story to Decker wanting to do well, so that his father will love him. But I haven't had time to add this element. I would appreciate any feedback about things that you thought work, and things you thought didn't. I plan to work on this part until I come to that mystical place where I decide that it's done. After that, I start work on my first book. (2 October 1994)

What struck me as I read this initial draft and author's note was the confidence John has both in his own story and in his ability to write. He was sure of his character and the world in which this story is set. My initial response was encouraging. I told him that he had managed to capture the tone, setting, language, and action of *Star Trek* faithfully. (Now, I watch *Star Trek*, and so I know this genre; another teacher would have had to ask more questions, I suspect.) I did tell him, though, that "given your new focus, should you back up in a few places early to let us see more of Decker, his life before this moment, especially his relationship with his father?" I also, on this first draft, cut a few words, an impulse I can rarely resist:

> Even though Decker knew that a constitution class starship was more powerful than a Klingon D-7 attack cruiser, three to one odds weren't good. ~~Still, it was their duty to try and rescue the damaged ship~~. "Mr. Keller, target the lead ship. If they fire on us, I want you to make sure they regret it." Decker knew that their only hope of rescuing the Maru lay in ending this quickly, ~~before any more ships showed up~~.
>
> "Aye, sir."
>
> Almost as if triggered by the captain's words, the Klingon ships fired on the *Republic*.

I wrote in the margin next to this paragraph: "I'm cutting the sentences that tell us what the details show us much more clearly." But mostly I responded as a reader, enjoying the action and John's ability to put me on the bridge of this Starfleet vessel, in the middle of the action. I also asked for more background and details that would make John's stated theme clearer to me.

His next draft, now with the title "Final Exam," did not focus on Decker's relationship with his father, but more tightly on Decker's desire to succeed. In his author's note to this version, John asked about more technical aspects of storytelling: "Is the pacing effective? Is the ending satisfying—or to put it another way, are Decker's motives/actions believable?" (12 October 1995). I thought they were, given the limits of a short story and

the universe of *Star Trek* where everything is solved in less than an hour. There was one final line at the very end of the story that bothered me, that I didn't quite understand: After the "final exam," Decker's Flight Captain asks, "Do you want to retake the test?" and John writes, "For the first time Decker looked Pike in the eyes and said, 'That won't be necessary, sir.' They headed off towards the briefing room." I knew what John was trying to convey here, that Decker has learned to accept his fallibility, but I just wasn't sure that these two lines were enough to show this change or why Pike would offer the option in the first place.

John never changed those lines, even though I wrote my questions about them next to every draft. That may seem stubborn, but it shows me quite a lot about John's reasons for writing, which extend beyond the class and my opinion, and his belief in his own sense of audience and purpose. I have to admit that I worried about the purposes of a *Star Trek* story in this class; at times I had trouble believe that working on this short story had much connection to the kind of writing that the academy values or to John's own classrooms down the road. However, John showed me the connection when he sent this draft off to several friends, "also trekkies," for the kind of specific feedback he needed. Here was a student, working as a writer, finding real readers and real purposes for writing; I realize that his *Star Trek* fiction, his insight into writing, and the teaching of writing, were indeed connected in ways that I would not have seen if I had remained focused on and fretful over genre.

Margaret showed me these connections perhaps more clearly than any other student last semester. She had been writing a variety of drafts, from an essay about teaching her nephew to write his name, a description of her grandfather sleeping which was really an argument about respect for old people and the pain of loss, and "The Valedictory Speech I Never Delivered," a scathing attack on the small-mindedness in her high school. But, on the last day of class, Margaret brought her favorite finished piece to class to show me and her small group. We ended up passing it around for everyone to see. It was a poem titled "Daddy's Girl," and she was giving it to her father as a Christmas present. In her cover letter to her final portfolio, Margaret described this poem:

> I have chosen to include in my "best pages" section my poem titled "Daddy's Girl." I have worked extremely hard on this poem to create my final product. My effort is evident when looking at the many drafts I have composed. Some of these drafts saw many significant changes, like line breaks. On other drafts, I changed only a few words. I do not consider myself an expert on poetry, but I do like this poem. (10 December 1994)

"Daddy's Girl" had begun as an essay, or at least as a prose poem. When I first saw this piece, it was a series of separate sentences, images of Margaret's father working on the car. It began: "Dad curved his hand around the plate of chrome and snapped the spring that released the hood." And on a separate line: "He looked over the mass of hoses and coils, which were covered with a layer of dust." The last "paragraph" read: "Finally he reached the hood again. He looked at me and said, 'Be good to my girl.' With that I pushed the silver door handle and left for school." Margaret's author's note on this first draft said:

> This is a piece (I'm not sure it's a poem although I think I want it to be) I wrote for my Dad. I got the idea for it when I went home and watched my Dad check over my old school car. It was Dad's first car and mine, too, and he treats it like it's a Rolls Royce. This is the piece I would like to put in the class book. I have good, strong feelings about this one. I think the reader can get a vivid picture of the car. Can you "see" the meaning here? (18 October 1994)

Of course, I was thrilled by the "double meaning," the poignancy of "daddy's girl" as the car this man so lovingly touches and cares for as his daughter leaves for school. My first response on this draft was to tell Margaret that she had a "great start," and that "I can see why this has such power for you." My advice at this point was to "play around with the line breaks, making the lines shorter and seeing what happens."

Over the next weeks, Margaret indeed played around with this poem, making both subtle and substantive changes by rearranging the lines and putting them together in different ways. Her "sentences" became stanzas:

> Finally,
> he reaches the hood again.
> He looks at me and says,
> "Be good to my girl."
>
> I nod
> and turn the key.
> School starts
> in ten minutes. (11 November 1994)

By the time she brought the finished poem to class, Margaret described her work this way:

> I think I have captured a few moments with my father before school well. The line breaks seem to make these moments even more realistic for the reader. As you and Lara [her group member] suggested, I experimented with them to see what I liked and what I didn't. While I was experimenting, I discovered how the poem changed and formed with each break. I think this was probably the most challenging piece I created this semester. As I stated, earlier, I know little about poetry writing. However, I feel writing my own poem allowed me to learn about the art of writing poetry. I also learned that, in writing poetry, all of the words must be carefully selected. While it is also true in composing other drafts, poetry seems to have a more delicate nature where each word is necessary and important.

Again, I'm pleased with Margaret's insights into the power of form here, and especially the connections she makes between form in poetry and prose. Because she chose this topic, and because she chose to write about her father in a poem, a poem *to* her father, she learned much more about working as a writer, with a real audience and a real purpose, and her choices mattered to her.

My doubts about the propriety and the place of short stories and poetry in a composition class are partly resolved by what students like John and Margaret tell me about their learning. But I don't have only success stories to report, as my readers must suspect by now. I never knew quite what to say about rhymed, bouncy poems that "worked" but that seemed finished the minute they were written. I felt at a loss to help one writer of short stories who seemed so caught up in the world she was creating that she couldn't explain it to me or to any reader. And a few times during this course, I steered writers away from short stories they were trying to write about people and issues very close to them; the distance, I felt, was masking their reasons for writing in the first place. Some of these students took my advice; some didn't. And the overall point is that perhaps my agenda as a reader isn't that important in the first place. "Shaking stories up" was the real work of this class, looking at them in different forms, for different purposes and audiences. Ted Lardner agues that "the languages of poetry and letters offer students avenues to make real sense of their experience" (101). I agree, but I would add that it's the choice of form that offers the sense-making, more than the form itself.

What's the Use of Stories That Aren't True?

> I've wanted to do something on my Grampa because he's really special to me, but also because he makes a great story.
>
> --Angie, author's note on draft, 20 October 1994

> What's the use of stories that aren't true?
>
> --Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 1990

In this class of future teachers, two students, who were practicing fiction writers, wrote only stories all semester; three students never ventured beyond the essay. But all the rest of the students in this class, and each of the writers whose work I've discussed so far, wrote a range of pieces, in a great variety of forms, over the course of the semester. I believe that part of the reason was the variety of work they were hearing from the other writers in the class, all a result of my requiring students to choose their own topics, form, and purposes for their own writing. Angie was a poet, a real poet, who had published her work and who wrote every day. Her poetry was a true pleasure to read, but I felt quite superfluous at times as her reader; I behaved more as a fan than a critic. And although I did not encourage her to write anything besides the poetry I was enjoying so much, right after midterm she handed in a draft called "Grampa's Water," a descriptive essay, familiar to me as a composition teacher but a new step for Angie. In her author's note, she explained:

> I've had the idea for this piece for a few years now, although I wasn't quite sure how I'd string it together until recently. I want this to be a sincere but humorous piece about my Grampa and the way a fishing trip we had gave me lot to think about. Most of the story is true, though the situation is presented in a somewhat altered context. Some characters and time periods have been left out, for example, in order to keep it short and tight. What I'd like to know from you is simply, what do you think? Does it pull you in? The part I like best is the first section where I've been able to tighten it up a bit. I think the details are coming along pretty well here. The part I like the least is the second section. I like what I want to do, but not what I've done. The way this part is now I'm telling not showing. What suggestions do you have? Any ideas here would be great. I'm never quite sure how well I do with prose. (26 October 1994)

Angie had worked the first part of this essay like a poet, going over it word for word, tightening and condensing and making her grandfather live on the page. As usual, I simply raved. But in the second section, there was actually work for me to do as a reader: I said things like "You're moving too fast here," "This sentence is hard to get through," or crossing out phrases and saying "This seems more stilted and wordy than you usually are." Through six drafts of "Grampa's Water," Angie and I wrote back and forth, examining the impact of specific words, moving scenes around, asking and answering questions of each other and the text, until she was satisfied enough to "publish" this essay in the class book. For example, next to "Fishing hadn't shown a better evening, though nothing had tugged our lines but the sun's reflection swimming on the water," I wrote, "'Shown' isn't the right word? Not very strong?" Angie's next version read, "We fished intently, though nothing tugged on our lines but the sun's reflection swimming on the water." We examined all her images of water, trying to connect and intensify their effect, from the lake itself, to the water jug the old man always carried, including images of rain, reflection, ripples, and the relentlessness of age. Her author's note on the last draft I read says:

> This is a polished version of "Grampa's Water." I'm glad that I've finally completed a piece that's been in my head for so long. While you're reading, I'd like for you to notice if the prose is engaging. Are there any parts left that lose you? contradict one another? weak spots? Did you like it enough to read it again? Does this give you what it promises at the beginning? Most important, does my intended theme come through strongly? It's hard for me to evaluate my prose because sometimes it seems to me like poetry, and good poetry and prose are not the same things. (22 November 1994)

Writing a piece of prose non-fiction, then, was a major step for Angie. And this reversal, the idea of writing an essay as a stretch in a composition class, underscores my point about genre being perhaps the least important thing for teachers to consider in setting up writing courses. Yet, she talks about this essay in language we usually reserve for fiction: the question "Did you like it enough to read it again?" reveals Angie's belief in the literary, aesthetic nature of this expository essay, and, I would argue, argues strongly for the effect of choice on a writer's confidence and belief in her own work. The question itself is an amazing act in a composition class in school. In the cover letter to her final portfolio, Angie described why writing an essay was, indeed, a creative act for her:

> At the beginning of the semester, I mentioned my intent to write different kinds of *pieces* on different kinds of *topics*. At first, I have to admit that I thought this was a very high goal to set, especially because I'm really pretty focused on writing poetry. Being around so many different kinds of people and their writing, though, helped me stay out of ruts and try new things. (10 December 1994)

The variety of writing that results from students choosing their own forms and topics, and the public reading and responding that are part of a writing workshop, then, often lead students to try forms that are new to them. The community of writers in a workshop challenges and sustains this kind of risk-taking.

In the end, I'm not sure that the generic difference between creative and expository writing have ever mattered that much in terms of the way English teachers respond to student writing. Given our own love of reading literature, I suspect that we've always asked students to write the kinds of prose that give us pleasure in the first place. Our advice about "adding detail" and making ideas "more specific" seems tied more to our literary preferences than to any outside "standards" for expository writing.[2] Angie's "story" about her grandfather, for example, was "true," but through her own metaphoric language she made the story both more and less, as she heightened and condensed according to her own imagination, her own memory, and her own purposes. Her grandfather did, indeed, "make a good story," a story that became more real as the result of its telling.

And truth is not the issue anyway. Berthoff says that

> The emphasis on differentiating critical and creative writing, as if they were symptoms of different brain functions, has meant that we've lost the advantages that are there to be enjoyed if we concentrate instead on what they have in common . . . . If we are to conceive of literacy as a facility in making meaning in reading and writing, we will need to understand the heuristic power of language itself . . . . Imagination must be rescued from the creativity corner and returned to the center of all that we do. (29)

If we think of the imagination in this way, then "true" and "untrue" stories blur into one another. The uses of stories that aren't true are many, and it's time we acknowledge their

uses more fully in composition classes, especially if our purposes are to help writers develop and understand the uses of writing in their lives, rather than helping texts develop according to some predetermined notion of what they should look and sound like.

In *Haroun*, the story of the Ocean of the Streams of Stories in fact saves stories for the world. Haroun's father regains the Gift of Gab, everyone is reunited, and we expect, lives happily ever after, all as a result of the telling of the story that is the novel. I'm sure that's an ending Rushdie would wish for, that stories would be free to roam the world, saving lives. However, Haroun learns at the end of his adventure that "Happy Endings are much rarer in stories, and also in life, than most people think" (201). Yet, the Walrus, the head guy of the Ocean of the Streams of Stories, announces that he's "learned how to synthesize them artificially. In plain language, *we can make them up*" (202). Like many essays where teachers explore their own teaching, this essay has built to a happy ending too, a vision of my students happily choosing and learning about the implications of those choices. I didn't make this up; I swear every word is true. And even if it's not, I hope it's useful to think about the place of stories and the imagination in composition classes.

Notes

[1] One of the other name changes I've made as a result is that I no longer say of the stack of papers in my arms as I leave the building at the end of the day, "I have to grade/mark/correct these papers tonight"; now, I say, "I have to read/respond to these papers tonight." I cannot emphasize enough the pleasure that this change has brought to my life.

[2] I have explored this question of English teachers' stylistic preferences in "Style: The Hidden Agenda in Composition Classes," in *The Subject Is Writing*, edited by Wendy Bishop and published in 1993 by Heinemann.

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Writing's in the Bag

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So much depends upon Ben's and Joe's arrival in the room.
In my daily rush
they
(Have you read Dragonlance Chronicles?
Will we write stories in here?)
ground me in purpose.

Later,
in drydead politics of faculty meeting,
Ben and Joe are life:
blood against white snow
dog's brown-eyed adoration
evil and good locked in mortal combat.

I agree:
I'd rather live in Dragonlance worlds than here.

Joe's reaction:

You want a respne. Im shock I relize the troubles and efforts yo goe trhough to grade we, the student's work. Your peace litturature holds enough truth to suprise me so I wrote one for you:

by Joe
So much it means for us
Mis. Lains early arival.
Now in your daily rush you answer
(Yes I've read Dragonlance Cronicles.
and Yes students do write story's in my class.)
Mrs. Lain the new life of dead politics
the very heart of our class.

Writing Down the Bones. I open the book on the airplane heading to my very first NCTE convention in Atlanta. The author, Natalie Goldberg, urges us to set up situations where we have to write. Don't just daydream about the slant of light as it strikes the house across the street, she cajoles us. Press against the inertia. Write.

Write from the center of yourself. Write and write until you shush all artificial voices--the stilted one you acquired in English 101, the vibrant one you lost in third grade when all you learned to care about was staying in the lines. Write until all that's left is the glowing ember of your own voice. Write without practicing the sentences in your head first. Write without an outline. Write without a thesis. Write, write, write, until you write from the inside out.

"Right, Goldberg," I mutter to myself. It's harder than it sounds. How to empty the mind: Kids Mrs. Lain-ing me to distraction. Parents calling to lobby for A's. Administrators haranguing about hall passes. Superintendents rattling around threats of budget cuts.

I read on. An organization decides to hold a carnival as a money raiser. Goldberg's asked to help. She agrees to set up a poetry booth. She writes a poem on the spot for each person who stops. Something like a cross between a gypsy fortune teller and a portrait artist who sketches your likeness *while you wait.* She makes money. She gets warm feedback.

Wow! I wonder if I can do that. It'd sure be good practice. It'd sure reinforce the Writing Project tenet: writing teachers should write themselves. It's sure be a nifty way to break into a poetry unit, demystifying poetry for kids.

I wonder about linking Goldberg's impromptu poetry idea with a classroom writing exercise I've used off and on for 20 years: Classmates give each other the gift of words collected in brown paper bags. The purpose? Using the holiday gift giving tradition, the exercise builds classroom community and it encourages writing. I give each kid a lunch bag with his name written in magic marker on the outside. Everyone also gets 20 or 30 pieces of paper, enough paper so every kid can write a message to every other kid in the room. Earlier, I'd thwacked out these 4 by 4 inch strips with the paper cutter.

It's the last day before winter break. "This is a writing day," I begin in my teacher talk. "We never take time in life--rushing along as we do keeping up with bells and bosses and busy work. We never say what other people really mean to us. What we notice about them that's unique, admirable. So take a slip of paper. Write a person's name on it--someone from this class--and begin to write to her. Two rules: Be positive and be specific. No generic, 'I'm glad you are in this class' or 'Happy holidays.' Say what you admire, what you'd never say out loud in the hall, because we're always protecting ourselves out there. Say what you remember from second grade, what you noticed yesterday. Something distinctive."

"Write a message to each person in the room." I restate for Dylan who never listens the first time. "Hurry! We have to mail them in the brown bags before the bell."

Everyone scribbles. Concentration builds by the minute. I look at the kid in the back of the room and write:

Sarah
refuses every rule
She snorted today--just audibly.
I'd said, "Take the pass,"
when she asked to use the bathroom.

she considers
rules ludicrous.

Ah, Sarah.
Some rules are required
to stretch us,
calisthenics of growth.

We need them to break.

When none are imposed
we have no tension--
like a stretched rubberband--

to propel us forward
Without them, a vacuum.
Too much like death.

I move up the row to Dan:

Dan rides.
The Wyoming prairie is his business.
Sagebrush brushes the underbelly of his horse
scents the dusty air
its memory lodges forever--
a permanent definition of home.

Then, Jon:

Jon--
a sports lover.

You name it:
soccer
baseball
basketball
football
hockey
boxing

He knows and loves the games.
Sports bracket his week.
School's just one long commercial break.

The bell rings, interrupting a few who take longer to spell out their hearts. This year, thanks to Goldberg's impromptu poetry idea, I don't finish. Impulsively I promise, "I'll write a poem for everyone during the holiday." They hurry to finish, pack up. Kids rush out, clutching their bags, their gifts of words. Later, I hear from the home ec teacher, from the art teacher that the kids are rattling their bags, reading their notes in other classrooms.

I've been doing this writing exercise for years when Duane, the prickly-as-cactus science teacher, plants a seed of doubt. "Do you read them first? How do you know they aren't insulting, threatening each other?"

At the end of the day, after 130 ninth graders blow through, leaving behind their trail of pencils and scraps of paper, I spy Doug's bag on the window ledge. He'd started his vacation early. I've never read the contents of a brown bag before, except my own. This time I open one and read: "Remember in third grade when I moved here and you showed me where the pencil sharpener was? I'm never going to forget your kindness, even though we aren't friends."

One after the other, the slips are little warm smiles in my hand.

When school resumes after vacation, is it just my imagination, or do the kids' faces warm up when they cross the threshold into my room? "I put my bag in my sock drawer," Amy pipes up. "I'm keeping it."

"January is poetry month," I remind them. "We're gearing up for *Romeo and Juliet* in February. It's a play written in poetry. Gotta get used to poetic language, like a foreign accent. Pungent as lemon juice. Tight as eyes squeezed against the snow-glare. Tender as the floor burn on your knee, Jeremy." (Basketball season is in full tilt.)

"Here are the poems I wrote for you." In my head I'm thinking it'll be a little harder for the kids to whine, "I hate poetry," when right before their eyes is a poem about their favorite subject--themselves.

"Can we read them out loud?" Dave wonders.

Dylan can't wait to volunteer:

Dylan's
off on vacation at his desk sometimes.
He wants to write his own way
no limits
and his story of the gruesome, man-eating tree
proves he should.
He learned to be in la-la land at school.
Elementary school
forced him to color in the lines of very narrow hallways.
Junior high
combed his hair flat, taming boyhood cowlicks.
But in high school,
this Halloween House of Horrors,
he finds fun.
Dylan's a Huck Finn grinning hero.

Someone elbows Jude into going next:

Jude.
Today at school
an unformed lump of clay
stuck in the mud of his own definition.

But inside
a red-cloaked gypsy
striding Zorro steps,
an Arab stalking
through swirls of his sheep and women
cruelty curling his mustache
scarlet passions firing jet-black eyes.

Alas, a desk again
so trivial a domain to contain
his rich red blood.

After everyone reads, Jason comments, "You hit every one. How do you *know* us like that?" And the next day, Sarahbeth says quietly, "My mom cried when she read mine."

Sarahbeth,
a Southern belle's name.
She's
sweet as sugar-coated drawl
soft as shade-dappled skin.

She's not Wyoming,
bouncing over rocks
catapulting into destiny.

She moves sedately in a green world
dropping white magnolia kisses on quiet ponds.

Build learning communities. Write down your bones. Blend the two and you have brown bags, a customized poem for each kid, and good practice for everyone. All this writing in English class takes time and courage--for all of us. It's such a risk to really write, especially in *school*, schools being such impersonal, bureaucratic places. I lack time and courage, too. But if my poetry isn't first-rate, it doesn't matter to these kids, enamored with the words that catch them, like a camera, in mid-stride. And if my time is short, well, these poems are worth it--I get more mileage from them in terms of credibility and cooperation than, say, scoring an essay assignment.

All this writing for one another builds a sense of belonging, of community. Adrienne writes her end-of-the-year reflection, saying what I hoped someone'd say:

Dear Mrs. Lain,

> I've been a pessimist for a long time, feeling like there is no hope, sanity or love left. I hope now that I've been in our class that my sour days are over. The students left feeling like something truly good went on this semester, something so individual that it couldn't be duplicated.
>
> The atmosphere was almost family-like. Some people tried to leave themselves out, but I wanted, we wanted everyone to be part of the whole. When we circled up for discussions, it was as though we had this strong diverse chain, even though the chain didn't notice it. I started caring about these people. They weren't sheep anymore.
>
> When this year is over, which it soon must, I will look back and think so sweetly of these people.

Adrienne 5-7-94

Using brown bags and impromptu teacher poetry gets us all writing, writing down our bones.

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The Dramatic Climax and "The Right Way to Write A Play"

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What was supposed to have been a fairly straightforward exercise devised for participants at the 1993 Presbyterian College Writers' Conference backfired in such an interesting way that it made me completely re-evaluate my teaching strategy for my playwriting courses at Francis Marion University. While the conference was geared primarily to college-aged and older writers, the lesson learned would, I hope, be valuable for someone teaching playwriting at almost any level. It has at any rate helped me predict and mitigate the problems my students have getting started on and completing a play, and it has helped them understand dramatic (and for that matter narrative) structure.

As the playwriting specialist at the conference, I was responsible for evaluating scripts submitted by six area writers, and for delivering a two-and-a-half-hour practicum on Writing for the Stage. The practicum, I found, presented some problems. For one thing, I had to address the unspoken supposition that I knew and would magically reveal "how to" write a play. I dispatched that myth by assuring everyone that, on that particular front, I had only a few clues, and that my responsibility was the same as theirs: to share ideas. For another, it was a very diverse group, experience-wise. One member was a theater professional; one was a college professor; some were new to playwriting and to varying degrees still intimidated by it; and some had not yet written plays but wanted to sit in anyway. Also, the types of plays submitted were all very different; some were straight, realistic dramas; one was a black comedy about a woman who buried her husband up to his neck on a beach at low tide and walked away; one was a Hurricane Hugo-mentary; one was a narrator-driven memory play. I was therefore unsure how to conduct a seminar whose content was specific enough to be actually useful, but at the same time general enough to be accessible to all involved.

I decided to discuss the one thing everybody would have some preconceptions about and which each play would presumably have in common--the climax.

Step One was to distribute a questionnaire which asked two simple questions:

1. Which moment, specifically, constitutes the climax of your play?
2. Why, specifically, is this moment the climax?

(Those who had not submitted a play were asked to answer the same questions about *Hamlet*, if they knew it, or, if they didn't, any recent popular movie.)

Step Two was *supposed* to have been a discussion of the definition of the dramatic climax, and thereafter an inquiry into whether and how each climax fulfilled the demands of each play (that is, the extent to which it addressed the central conflict, and the way in which it resolved it). What happened instead was that all but one of the writers had a difficult time getting past the first question: They could not (at least not immediately) decide which point constituted the climax *in their own plays*. One person, in fact, concluded she did not *have* one. These discoveries had the effect of putting some of the

writers in a state of alarm, and me in a state of disarray, my outline having been thus torpedoed.

What ensued was a discussion about the *process* involved in writing a play, which quite naturally implied the question, "What is the right way to go about writing a play?" The woman who knew precisely where her climax was had decided upon that moment--the beach burial--first, and had then written the rest of her play around it. The others had started with basic situations or characters, and then, to varying degrees of success, tried to figure out what to *do* with them. They had not, that is, decided what would *happen* in their plays. As each of these latter plays was to some extent autobiographical, we proposed that there was a correlation between a writer's *familiarity* with his subject matter and his belief that it would find its own way.

It is important to note here that we did not summarily conclude that the majority had gone about writing their plays the "wrong" way. Indeed, some of them had enjoyed their voyage into the darkness, seemed to know intuitively where it was taking them, and had arrived at a conclusive and satisfying denouement. Others, however, conceded that without a preconceived destination in the form of a climax, they ended up feeling lost. Moreover, the woman who had decided upon her climax first admitted that she had problems writing toward it--making it possible--and indeed, some of the decisions she made along those lines were convenient contrivances.

Our first conclusion, therefore, took the form of a compromise: While writing from the climax out might deprive a writer of the process of discovery, doing the opposite might deprive a play of a *plot*. In retrospect, I'm not entirely sure what the usefulness of this compromise was, except perhaps that each of the writers was able to examine the efficacy of his own invention methodology, and perhaps to experiment with another.

Our cart, by now, was well ahead of our horse. At this point we needed to backtrack and try to define what we meant by "climax." I presented the group with three short definitions culled from some of the "how-to" manuals on playwriting--new and old--and asked them to decide which best corroborated their definition of "climax" in the abstract and/or best described the climax of their particular plays. I chose these definitions precisely because they tend to contradict one another.

Laura Shamas, in *Playwriting for Theater, Film and Television* (an approachable text intended for high school-level writers), articulates the most conventional, popular definition of the dramatic climax, calling it "a huge explosion" in a play, or the "major event" (43). Similarly, to William Packard, in *The Art of the Playwright* (which assumes considerably more experience and expertise), the climax is "the peak of intensity of an action" (89). He points to the play-within-the-play scene in *Hamlet* as a useful example, and one with which we all nodded in general agreement.

Bernard Grebanier, in his venerable if Draconian *Playwriting: How to Write For the Stage*, concurs with both Shamas and Packard that a climax constitutes the significant "turning point" in the plot. However, he contends that it is "almost *never* the most exciting moment of the drama." Indeed, it can "very well be a moment that does not strike the audience with its importance at all." He parallels this pronouncement by observing, "So it is often in life. As . . . a biographer of George Washington has said, 'The turning points of lives are often not the great moments. The real crises are often concealed in occurrences so trivial in appearance that they pass unobserved' " (107-8). Had I thought about it, I might at this point have entered Frost's "The Road Less Travelled" into evidence.

To further complicate things, Grebanier maintains that the play-within-the-play scene in *Hamlet*, while "the most exciting in the tragedy, is not, of course, the climax." Instead, it is "Hamlet's killing of Polonius," as it represents a truer turning point, and fulfills one of Grebanier's primary criteria for a climax, namely that it is "*always a deed performed by the central character*" (118, italics his).

Space will not allow, even if memory could fully reveal, a discussion about which of these definitions applied to which participant's play. Suffice it to say that they created

useful disagreement and forced some new perspectives. Each writer had at this point to answer for himself three questions about his climax:

1. Is it the most exciting moment in the drama, or something less than that?
2. Is it an action taken by the primary character, or by someone less than that?
3. What *type* of action is it? A discovery, a reversal, a decision, or a resolution?

Whichever decisions each writer arrived at, they at least forced him to identify the primary turning point in his play, to boil his plot down to a single motion, and to evaluate the significance of that motion: Some plays were "about" an act of violence; others were "about" an act of kindness, or a plea for connection, or a vital revelation--the "I've got a secret" structure typified by *Equus* and most whodunits. In this way each writer had to arrive at a definition of "climax" as it applied to his play, and further to decide what type of play he had--not always consciously--written. This process constituted the crux of the practicum.

The next (and last) step was to throw into the mix Oscar Brownstein's definition of the dramatic climax. I chose it partly because it would challenge all the aforementioned prescriptions or assumptions, but mostly because I happen to admire it very much. In *Strategies of Drama*, Brownstein proposes a definition of the climax which, as he says, is "very different from one traditional view that associates the term with a 'turning point' near the middle of a play" (118).

To Brownstein's eye, the climax happens *not* on the stage, but rather in the audience; it is "an actual event in the life of the spectator" in the form of a "perception shift." More than a "moment in the present or a collection of impressions," it is instead "one whole thing, an expanding sphere of discovered significance" (117-118). More specifically still, it is a revelation which should astonish us "into a condition that demands a revision of our understanding of [the central character] of his motives, and therefore of the significance of the play" (115). He argues further that:

> Ordinary perception shifts are ordinarily daily occurrences; those that are epiphanal draw on a reservoir of feeling and thought sufficiently large that the experience becomes a revisioning of the world. Plays provide through art something that the conditions of everyday life rarely permit, the experience of an event that engages us quite personally but startles us into a distanced response . . . . In that way the play is not a statement about the world but becomes an experienced perception of our world. (118)

Among our group, there was general agreement and even delight with Brownstein's definition. Each playwright was willing--in fact eager--to admit that the off-stage *effect* Brownstein describes was, in retrospect, what he wanted his on-stage climactic moment to *cause*. Our understanding of the dramatic climax was therefore expanded to include--perhaps even to emphasize--Brownstein's "perception shift." And it was on this not that our practicum happily ended.

Unhappily, I later realized that ending on that note may have implied the wrong answer to the question, "What is the right way to go about writing a play?" *Strategies of Drama* is, after all, more a *descriptive* examination of dramatic structure than a *prescriptive* manual on playwriting--a crucial distinction that ought to have been made clear. For if one accepts Brownstein's definition, and therefore his assertion that "dramatic art is best understood as a grand strategy for creating experience" (119), one might reasonably conclude that he must, in beginning a play, *consciously strategize*, as his chief priority, the orchestration and indeed *timing* of an audience's collective, unconscious emotional response. While this may be a noble objective, I'm sure that it's not wholly possible. Many playwrights are of course frequently astounded, and sometimes outraged, at audience's (and critics') responses to their plays.

In an essay titled "A National Dream Life" in his book *Writing in Restaurants*, David Mamet more or less corroborates Brownstein's theory by proposing that "We respond to a drama to that extent to which it corresponds to our dream life" (8). By this he means that a play "is a quest for a solution" to a question, a quest in which "the law of psychic economy operates":

> In dreams, we do not seek answers which our conscious (rational) mind is capable of supplying, we seek answers to those questions which the conscious mind is incompetent to deal with. So with the drama, if the question posed is one which can be answered rationally, e.g.: how does one fix a car, should white people be nice to black people . . . our enjoyment of the drama is incomplete--we feel diverted but not fulfilled. *Only if the question posed is one whose complexity and depth renders it unsusceptible to rational examination does the dramatic treatment seem to us appropriate, and the dramatic solution become enlightening.* (8-9, italics mine)

As a means of *evaluating* a play, Mamet's comments are particularly insightful and useful. In a good play, the answer to the question posed by the *plot* (e.g., Will Hamlet avenge his father's murder? --Yes.) is of course never as interesting as the underlying ramifications--the themes--attendant to that answer (in *Hamlet*, the uses of power, the nature of death, the wages of idealism, etc.). Any thorough discussion of a play would naturally dwell more on what the dramatic action *meant*, as opposed to what it *was*.

But as an approach to *writing* or to *teaching* writing, such comments can be terrifying. To encourage a writer --especially a young writer--to think in terms of "psychic economy" or "spheres of discovered significance"--that is, to ask him to intellectualize all that he might otherwise unconsciously invest in his plays--would be to intimidate him into creative paralysis. It would also mean presupposing a writer's *awareness* of the various thematic layers and psychological textures in his work, which would of course be wildly misleading and discouraging.

In earlier playwriting courses, I have made what I now see as the mistake of introducing my students to such theory before allowing them enough creative practice. Early in the semester, for instance, after getting them started on their own one-acts, I have asked them to discuss the "meaning" of the published and sometimes famous plays we used as models. Having examined, say, a play's metaphors, allusions, motifs or political implications, they have too often asked me, in horror, "But do we have to *think* about all that?"

No. They don't, and they shouldn't. English courses--particularly college English courses--are notorious enough for inflating and glorifying the left hemisphere at the expense of the right, and for wringing the life out of whatever notion a student may have that he might *participate* in literature on any other level than that of wishful admirer. Having no desire to perpetuate that injustice, I now have my students start by focusing on basic structural elements (e.g., the difference between situation and conflict), and language (the difference between text and subtext), and provide them with Mamet's advice about beginning a play:

> I usually don't start with a theme in mind, I usually start just writing . . . . To write a play with a stringent plot is wonderfully, incredibly demanding. That's what I try to do when I write a play: stick to the plot. If I do that, the rest will take care of itself. The theme is a post facto consideration . . . . I follow the plot wherever it happens to lead. ("Mamet on Playwriting" 11)

In other words, I de-emphasize the literary element of the course--and of drama itself--and, without *too* much in the way of prescriptive guidance, bid them write.

Only later in the semester, when they are—predictably—groaning about the difficulty they are having constructing a "stringent" plot, do I ask them to identify the climax of their plays, and often find that they can't, or don't yet have one. I then try to replicate the experiment I tried at the Presbyterian College conference, and present them with the various definitions and descriptions aforementioned—Brownstein's included. It is at this later point, I hope, when they have discovered their *own* way to write a play and are at least part way through the tunnel they're building, that they can most usefully and constructively start thinking in terms of where it is leading them. Ideally, this will be a way of facilitating, according to their own terms, the completion and the success of their plays.

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Invention in the Poetry Writing Class: Adventures in Speech Genres

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> Any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe.
>
> Bakhtin, *The Problem of Speech Genres*

If one goal in teaching students to write poems is to urge them to begin their writing processes as established poets begin theirs, we will soon feel frustrated in our efforts. Clearly, investigations into the writing processes of experienced writers have helped us understand what students should do in composition courses. But in the absence of such "models" for the teaching of creative writing, Ron McFarland (1993) seems accurate when he writes, "We all have one gimmick or another, some trick-of-the-trade to pass on to our students, but few writers would use it as the underpinning for a course" (37). McFarland is correct insofar as we should not be satisfied using gimmicks and tricks as underpinnings for a course in poetry writing. But from the perspective on invention widely held among poets and teachers of poetry writing courses, a pedagogy based on what McFarland calls "gimmicks" seems inevitable.

After all, most poets in considering what should go on in a poetry writing class have come to advocate a Romantic view of the writing process. The underlying assumptions of that view run counter to the inquiry I report on here. In fact, a Romantic view of poetry writing, by its very insistence on the mysterious nature of the creative act, denies that we can or should know much about creative processes.

In fact, the judgment that the creative process is too personal and too mysterious to inquire about is typical of Romantic/expressivist views, especially where matters of invention are concerned. By pointing out where we are in the evolution of thought about creative writing pedagogy, however, I do not wish to detract from this Romantic view or attack it. But I do want to state what I perceive to be the dominant attitude toward invention in poetry writing--that is, a Romantic attitude--and three common views of classroom practice that are consistent with that attitude.

The first of these views is based on the Romantic/expressivist belief that expression is valuable in its own right and without further revision since it reflects students' articulations of otherwise-hidden inner thoughts.[1] Second, some who view invention as a mysterious process have opted to focus on a tangible element of poetry writing, the ability to revise craftily, a response that assumes invention is something beginning poets can learn by themselves or something that they can be tricked into by use of what Richard Hugo (1979) calls "triggering devices." Third are those who combine the two above views, accepting expression as something that can be improved upon through revisions that attend to craft. The assumption underlying these three views is that, in final analysis, we cannot truly understand the mystery of our creative processes. And that lack of information requires that we look elsewhere--to instruction in craft--in determining what we should do in the creative writing class.

Unchallenged, these views continue to influence the way we teach students to write poems. After all, many writers who are interested in determining through the means available to them how best to teach creative writing have felt much as Wendy Bishop does when, in *Colors of a Different Horse* (Bishop and Ostrom 1994), she confesses: "I've often felt an outsider to creative writing 'society' and insecure about my forays into that particular cafe" (280). Many in creative writing society will be quick to see efforts to understand what ought to go on in a creative writing class as "theory" and people who make those efforts as "theorists."

No doubt, writers have had to defend themselves in this Romantic Era of instruction from intrusions into what they do both as writers and as teachers of writing. And that defense has been against theory and the way theory has invaded English departments, a basically destructive, subversive, though hardly a well-known assailant.

Part of the difficulty as I see it is that writers defending the ranks against theory speak about theory in two ways: 1) as though they don't have one--that is, as if speaking against theory does not require a theoretical position from which to speak, and 2) as though "theory" includes a great many things--literary-critical theories, learning theories, composition theories, creativity theories, empirical research, case study, ethnographic inquiry, and on and on . . . .

There is nothing wrong with these defenses of the Romantic/expressivist perspective on invention in creative writing classes, but there is little new in them. They characteristically begin in the belief that poetic invention is a mystery we cannot understand and that reading as a writer involves nothing more than studying technique. In any effort to improve what we do, we should feel the burden of finding better ways to engage students in the writing of poems. Bakhtinian speech genres provide such an alternative to these Romantic views of instruction in a poetry writing class, relieving young writers of the burden they must carry when they are led to believe they write in isolation, cut off from all prior poetic effort, and yet must participate in an activity described variously as miraculous, mysterious, and unknowable.

1. Speech Genres: What Teachers Need to Know

In an essay entitled "From Discourse in Life to Discourse in Poetry: Teaching Poems as Bakhtinian Speech Genres" (1991), Don Bialostosky offers a solution to one of the most trying problems teachers confront in teaching students how to read poetry: how to draw upon information they already possess in teaching them to read. Bialostosky's solution--to teach poems as Bakhtinian speech genres--opens a new avenue of inquiry that might be profitably employed not only in teaching students how to read poems, but in teaching them how to write poems as well.

As most creative writing teachers know quite well, many of our students enter the classroom, often enthused by the opportunity to spend the semester writing poems, but just as often prevented from doing so because they are poorly read in the very genre in which they hope to write. Teachers working within the Romantic/expressivist tradition add to this problem by approaching invention as a mysterious process and poetry writing as something that happens in isolation.

By contrast, the effort reported upon in this essay was made to determine if an introductory poetry writing course might wisely be arranged by speech genres to enable students not only to become better readers of poetry, but better writers as well, writers conscious not only of how the poems they write participate in some ongoing "utterance," to use the term as Bakhtin does, but of the subtle ways their poems differ as well from other poems in the speech genre studied.

Bakhtin defines speech genres by placing them in the context of his interest in the relationship between language and social activity. He writes,

> All the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language. Quite understandably, the nature and forms of this use are just as diverse as are the areas of human activity . . . . Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity. These utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area not only through their content (thematic) and linguistic style, that is, the selection of the lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources of the language, but above all through their compositional structure. (944)

For Bakhtin, language is suited to activity which, in turn, as social encounter, gives cause for making utterances. Significantly--and here Bakhtin departs from Saussurean theories of language--language according to this theory is a social construct, one that reflects the "specific conditions and goals" of each social situation. In short, "language creates rather than conveys our reality . . . and . . . does so in a process that is collaborative rather than individual . . . " (Clark and Holquist 9).

From this perspective, then, social situations rather than individual expression give language its "thematic content, style, and compositional structure." Bakhtin continues,

> All three of these aspects--thematic content, style, and compositional structure--are inseparably linked to the *whole* of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication. Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable* types of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*. (944)

Bakhtin stresses in this passage the dynamic social nature of language; its dependence on a social context for content, style, and arrangement, as determined by the sphere in which it is used, though individual in each separate utterance, results nonetheless in "relatively stable types of . . . utterances"--that is, utterances unique to each sphere. This particular quality of speech genres interests me most as I reflect upon ways I might adapt this theory to practice in my poetry writing courses. This adaptation, however, works against the Romantic/expressivist notion of invention employed in most poetry writing classes.

As Bakhtin writes, every speaker except the very first, "the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe," is a responder who presupposes "not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances--his own and others'--with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another" (951). For Bakhtin, then, each listener is, in turn, a responder, and each response is a continuation of preceding responses: All speakers continue the utterance that precedes them. As Bakhtin puts it, "The desire to make one's speech understood is only an abstract aspect of the speaker's concrete and total speech plan" (951).

Not only does this notion of dialogue, as Bakhtin forwards it, work against the Romantic view of invention-as-mystery, but, as Ewald (1993) claims, "Bakhtin's questioning of the conventional concept of author resembles other such challenges to the myth of the solitary writer" (334). Rather than working in isolation, then, Bakhtin believes authors collaborate with their predecessors, contributing to and changing received utterances.

How might this information help us in a poetry writing class? Bialostosky believes that by teaching students to read poems as speech genres, we enable them to "see" poems differently. More specifically, such a view permits students to understand poems in the context of shared "'real-life conditions' such as 'membership of the

speakers to a single family, profession, class, or any other social group, and . . . to the same period' " (216). The benefit of employing poems as speech genres is most apparent as a way of enabling students to draw upon the knowledge and experience they obtained *prior* to entering class.

Bialostosky extrapolates Bakhtin's theory just enough to make classroom adaptation possible.

> As Bakhtin indicates, there nowhere exists a complete or systematic enumeration of such genres, but our repertoires include lots of them. The apology, the giving of direction, the greeting, the farewell, the invitation, the request, the boast, the taunt, the command, the anecdote are a few of the everyday speech genres we are familiar with. (220)

Biolostosky stresses his belief that by organizing a course in the reading of poetry around speech genres, he has given students the opportunity to satisfy their expectations about specific utterances. He writes,

> these genres . . . combine expectations about what will be talked about (thematic content), what sort of language will be appropriate (style), and what parts the utterance must have (compositional structure or what the rhetoricians called 'arrangement') with expectations about the situations in which such utterances will be used, the sort of people who will use them, the sort of people they will use them on or with, and the sorts of purposes for which they will be used. (220)

From a certain perspective, then, by advocating the arrangement of a poetry writing class in terms of speech genres, I am also advocating extensive and innovative uses of modeling. In "Apologies and Accommodations: Imitation and the Writing Process," Farmer and Arrington (1993) assert that Bakhtin and modeling go together comfortably, inevitably. All language exists, then, in "an atmosphere of the already spoken" (25). And if this is so, from the Bakhtinian perspective, we can hardly expect our students or ourselves to be free of predecessors.

2. Uses of Speech Genres in a Poetry Writing Class

The assignment involving the use of speech genres in my introduction to poetry writing class, as it appears in the course syllabus, requires students during weeks 3-6 of the semester to work on poems that arise from everyday speech situations. Students must submit two items: a draft of a poem and a notecard analyzing the way the poem fits into a speech genre, comparing and contrasting a minimum of three poems from the anthology.

Naturally, giving the assignment in the syllabus is simply not enough since students hold fast to the Romantic/expressivist notion that poetry writing is a mysterious activity and that each new effort at writing a poem is made by authors in isolation.

The first step, of course, is making certain that students understand what is meant by speech genres. To do so, I ask them to list fairly standard kinds of things they say each day to the people they see--that is, I ask them to brainstorm various situations they enter each day that require what we might call "patterned" or "rehearsed" speech. They point out a range of such speech situations, including greetings, discussions about different courses, conversations about (and often during) sporting events, and many others.

I list these speech situations on the board and ask students to choose one speech situation they agree, as a group, might be most interesting to write about. Each student, working independently at first, is asked to describe what typically

happens in that one situation, inventing dialogue if possible but, in any event, describing the speech situation in terms of *content* of what is typically spoken, various *styles* with which it might be spoken, and *arrangement* of what is typically spoken. Of course, my students are busily completing the work Bakhtin never finished--that is, making a list of "spheres of communication."

I ask students, then, to get into groups and discuss the speech situation, devising a composite analysis to be read to the class. As each list is read, students take notes to further understand how others perceive a given speech situation.

As an assignment for the next class, I ask students to look through the anthology and build a mini-anthology of readings that in some way reflect poems in or about the speech situation we have explored as a class. We build this mini-anthology as a class and spend the next three class hours reading as writers in this speech genre, looking closely at content, style, and arrangement, paying particular attention to how these poems fit into our prior experience with the speech situation.

During fall semester 1994 we wrote a range of poems that fit into Bakhtinian speech genres. As an example of what might result, here's a notecard and a poem in the genre of "drunkenness" written by Alex, a college senior majoring in theater and minoring in English.

Let me add a word of caution, though. Because I am still learning how to use speech genres in my classroom, I am not reluctant to point out my error in handling certain speech genres such as the one that follows. Poems of drunkenness, though accessible to students, really are characteristic of what Bakhtin calls *secondary speech genres*, a far more complex synthesis of several primary speech genres. Clearly, Alex's poem involves dialogue not only with others who describe a first experience with drunkenness, but also with those who contribute to utterances about the particular event, the fear that arises from being inexperienced with something, and poems focusing on place, adulthood, and other related matters. Still, the dominant theme in Alex's poem is drunkenness, as you can see.

Here's Alex's treatment of three poems leading to analysis of her poem, "Our Moonshine Time," and the poem itself. Not only does this effort tend to fit comfortably into the notion of speech genre as it might most profitably be used in a poetry writing class, but Alex's responses to poems in this genre reflect her growth as a person entering the dialogue about drunkenness.

Poems on drunkenness

"Tequila" by Elizabeth Spires

1. The loneliness, isolation in the mountains
2. The separation from neighbors ("I'll leave a sign on the door . . .") is purposeful and drunks often do the same. They push people away with alcohol.
3. Alcohol is a barrier between the sober and the drunk
4. Marathon drinking ("up all night")
5. Trips to the bars
6. Free verse, first person

"Frying Trout While Drunk" by Lynn Emanuelle

1. Victimization
2. Shared and related behavior ("When I drink I am too much like her . . .")
3. Drinking to forget, to become isolated
4. Free verse, first person
5. Where they drink is very important to the poem

"Eight Ball at Twilight" by David Baker

1. Typical bar scene which embraces the cliches of a bar. This gives the poem a sense of familiarity
2. Place is very important to this poem because the alcohol is a side issue

3. Free verse
4. This poem offers a glimpse inside a bar which might be unique, but most likely is occurring over and over in every bar everywhere

"Our Moonshine Time" by Alex

similarities

1. Free verse, first person
2. Loneliness, boredom is related to our age and the conforming rules of society. This is opposed to drinking because it's a habit or a lifestyle.
3. We drink for excitement and danger. We climb the roof for the same reason.
4. Shared experience, related behavior. I drank moonshine because I was with her and because she asked. We are in the same tedious stage of life.
5. Availability. Beer wasn't exciting enough to get me to drink for the first time. Nothing would come of drinking beer. Whiskey, and moonshine at that (real corn squeezing!), was extreme enough.
6. Marathon drinking (up all night)

differences

1. Alcohol wasn't a barrier; it was a leaping off place in this poem. The moonshine brought us even closer together as we alienated our outside (parental) world.
2. We were not drinking to forget; we were drinking to start living.

Here's Alex's poem:

Our Moonshine Time
What was allowed had already been done.
Thick with pizza and sick of movies that show
you a lot of a woman, but none of a man, feeling
slammed shut with rules that fit my age,
but suffocated my body and spirit. I listened
closely to her tales of moonshine and intoxication.
She wrapped her arm around my neck and made promises
of an unstable evening. I agreed to the bad
influence, eagerly handing in my virgin tongue.
We sat facing the moon, our backs supported
by the chimney. She handed me a jar of
white lightning and we burned our throats
simultaneously, counting to three for courage.

As Alex was correct to point out about Baker's "Eight Ball at Twilite," the genre of drunkenness comes quite close in some uses to being yet another secondary speech genre. Nonetheless, Alex is able to negotiate the complexity of such a treatment and focus on her own first experience drinking moonshine.

Let me note here that not only was I able to make certain that students read widely as writers in their chosen genre, but by writing about three poems in that genre and then focusing on the way their poems entered the dialogue with the other three, I was able to use their description of features of their poems as a way of evaluating the poem's success.

Naturally, Alex could have gone further in her analysis of the poems in the speech genre. In future efforts, I will ask students to write their preliminary analyses of poems in a speech genre by using worksheets which focus on the three elements Bakhtin stresses--content, style, and arrangement.

3. Some Conclusions

This assignment accomplishes three goals that might not be satisfied using a more Romanticized version of creative writing instruction. First, by using speech

genres in this way, the burden of isolation is lifted off the students. In fact, they come to see that imitation is not only helpful to beginning poets, but it is, in fact, an inevitable condition of all speech acts (oral and written). And they learn that writing a poem, from this perspective, is much like entering a room where conversation has already begun; their job is to add an observation or two to what has already been spoken. Writers from this perspective are members of communities of writers and each sphere of activity has its own community.

Second, by acknowledging their participation in such a dialogue, students can better see how invention takes place. Since we are working with the notion that utterances arise from "diverse areas of human activity" (Bakhtin 944) and that "[t]hese utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area," invention is a less miraculous activity than it was perceived to be by those in the Romantic/expressivist tradition. Any new utterances, including poems by students, are made in a larger context and within a community of other speakers. Invention in this sense is a continuation of an ongoing dialogue. Every new utterance is in its content, style, and organization linked to all other utterances in that speech genre. Bakhtin even makes concessions to individuality: "Any utterance--oral or written . . . in any sphere of communication--is individual and therefore can reflect the individuality of the speaker (or writer); that is, it possesses individual style" (947).

Third, because our focus is on certain specific spheres of communication, students find themselves reading widely and "reading as writers," thinking during their reading time about how they might contribute to the dialogue taking place on the pages in front of them.

For the time being, I believe I have found a method of invention in a poetry writing class that might be used either as an alternative to the Romantic/expressivist view of instruction in creative writing or in addition to "triggering" devices that typify what McFarland calls "tricks and gimmicks" writing teachers use with their students. And when I look at the efforts made by Alex (and others in that class), I am encouraged as I reflect on what I have learned as a teacher using Bakhtinian speech genres.

Notes

[1] In his professional book, *Teaching Creative Writing*, published in 1937 as "A Publication of the Progressive Education Association," Lawrence H. Conrad writes about the then-current view of students, a view not many of us today would claim as our own, even though we may claim pedagogy based on this view. "With our increased knowledge of the needs and aptitudes of the adolescent years, we have come to set a high value upon creative practices wherever they may be introduced in the curriculum . . . " (3). Conrad continues by stating that the true value of creative writing is as a record of the emotional and psychological development of students, including college and university students.

[2] See, for instance, Sanders, "The Writer in the University" (1992), Lehman, "What is Postmodernism" (1994), and Frenza in "Tradition and the Institutionalized Talent" (1992), all published in the *AWP Chronicle*, for the range of defenses. For instance, Lehman uses sarcasm in his definition of postmodernism since, as he writes, "nobody, with the exception of a few academics, really likes the term, but it won't go away" (2). Frenza uses guilt by association, a tactic that might suggest that Luce Irigaray and Madonna hold much in common: "Like Madonna, academic critics are self-involved with their own fabulousness, gratifying themselves with their own intertextual prowess, their etymological riffling, their eclectic thievery of fashionable styles. The resulting style, however, is really the awful antithesis of style, like Madonna's: practiced manipulation and self-advertisement" (20)

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Myths and Little Miracles: Advice to Beginning Creative Writing Students

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Creative writing is a popular non-subject. This is one of the few classes where there is so much give and take and so little memorizable and repeatable subject matter. You are in fact the subject matter of this course. You are graduate students of yourselves, your wishes, lies, and dreams, as Kenneth Koch wrote. You learn the techniques of transforming your experiences into several creative forms and some tools for evaluating them.

Now, if you compose upside down in the lotus position and publish in *The New Yorker*, fine, we'll trade places. I'll sit down and you take over the class. But if you are adrift, estranged from creative work by the difficulty in expressing yourself, this is, first and foremost, a course about permissions, getting your mother off your back, your teacher out of your head, liberating yourself from your most critical peer. Let me assure you, if you can speak you can write. We are all in a sense prisoners of old ideas. This article is intended to demystify the creative process, to dispel the folklore we are all misguided by because old ideas paralyze the very writing they are intended to facilitate. Statements debunking such folklore have appeared often and widely over the years, yet instructors like me feel compelled to pass them on again and again because they come as a kind of revelation to young writers.

The Myths[1]

1. You must think before you write

The problem in any art is usually the same--to start the flow and then bring form to it. There are two principal methods of doing that. I call them the modeling and carving methods. By the modeling method I mean building as in clay, dab by dab, one sentence at a time. British playwright Tom Stoppard is rumored to compose that way. I imagine that he writes a line, sits with it, polishes it until it is brilliant and then moves to the second line. In the carving method we write down everything and then start carving in clay-- subtracting, gradually eliminating the excess from the gem.

For those of us great unwashed, thinking in the strict sense can curtail that flow. Writing creates ideas and experience on paper that might never have existed in the conscious mind before writing. It's scary when you are sitting at a desk, being formal, dressed for the occasion, with sharpened pencils and a perfectly appointed desk. Don't do it. Never go to your desk with an empty pad or paper or without notes. How do you get ideas? You write when you're not thinking about writing. Keep pad and pencils nearby to receive that writing. I write in the movies. I write in the car. I was once spared a ticket by a police officer whom I convinced was a former student of mine. Anything more than a "the" is a beginning.

2. You must have something to say in order to write

A corollary to #1, this folklore I explode with an old chestnut my father used to tell us at meals: The appetite comes while eating. Ideas, like the appetite, come while writing. You discover what you have to say in the act of saying it. And you get up the courage to write it. James Baldwin said, Tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more. Don't be afraid of your thoughts. Writers say what other people only think. Level with your reader. But don't try to imagine against the grain. (Let someone else tell the story of Mother Theresa in Calcutta or The Rosicrucians at Lourdes.) It is never too early to apply E. M. Forster's insight: How do I know what I think until I see what I say? If ideas are not out of your body, separated like a newborn from its mother, you cannot give them proper ventilation, a chance to breathe on their own. You cannot really think about your thoughts. When you write, you figuratively make yourself two persons out of one. Once you have written, you, as subject, can review closely what you, as object, have said.

3. Learning to write precedes writing

A fixed period of prewriting or planning cannot be distinguished before any writing act. Nor should it. We learn while writing. And for most of us, it is a slowly accruing skill. No one really knows when planning starts. Few of us care. What we care about is capturing ideas before they are censored or forgotten. With the subtraction method you may write a lot of junk. But you won't risk throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Don't necessarily set out to write a poem, or a short story. Stay provisional as long as you can. If a form is imposed too early, it often inhibits the flow. Get your ideas down and the piece will gradually find its form: short fiction, personal essay, poem, or drama.

4. Writing should be right the first time

Most of us are lazy. We think that if we take the time to compose sentences in our heads rather than write them down, they will come out perfectly. And we have saved the time and trouble of rewriting, fussing with them. After all, we fussed with them in our heads. Shouldn't that be enough? It is a lovely wish but for the most part inaccurate. I promise that no matter how hard you work, you will probably never write several consecutive drafts of a first sentence or last without something being awkward or unintelligible. What's more, you will probably never be able to speak more than three consecutive sentences without producing something clumsy or obscure. Decide that your first draft is your final draft and you will never write a creative word. Pre-editing in our heads to save time really wastes time.

5. Writing should be easy and its cousin, **Writing should be efficient, that is, fast and accurate**

Nonsense. Writing is sublimely inefficient for most of us. And it is demanding. Most of us agonize. We write. We rewrite. We move language around, manipulate it, multiply and divide it. Maya Angelou said it well: "Easy reading takes hard writing."

6. Neatness now; content comes later

I lived this lie when I went to public school. I remember ink wells, writing inside thin red margins, eradicator that bleached my paper and the desk beneath it, and ink erasers that rubbed through almost everything in their way. One draft written

in pen, I could never quite get it. Of course, writing can be neat for some people. But, by and large, early drafts need be no one's but yours--so long as they are readable. Getting the ideas down is the overarching goal of these drafts--no matter how boring, childish, or chaotic they may be. I have come to trust my fits and starts. I am confident that the seemingly aimless jottings of my first 17 lines are indeed responsible for the success of, say, line 18. I don't concentrate on prettiness or perfection. I lower my expectations and move on.

7. Writing can be generated on demand

This is partly true. While you cannot always expect to create a story at the drop of a hat, you can get used to writing all the time, especially when it resonates in your head. Keep paper and pencil in the bathroom, at your bedside, in your pocket or purse. When an idea itches, scratch it. When your mind wanders, follow it. When imagination offers you an idea, write it down, no matter how digressive. The digression might even be better than what you were digressing from.

By the same token, don't procrastinate. Don't take a break to dodge your work. Take a legitimate break to reflect, for ideas to incubate. Put another way, give yourself lots of time: If you are worried about what other people will think of your creative work, don't put yourself in a position of writing an important piece without giving yourself a chance to revise -- a chance to make constructive and clarifying changes. Restricting yourself to a single draft with no chance for change only invites writer's block and mediocre output. Some writers let their material sit for six months, others twenty years. Moreover, set realistic goals for yourself. Rutgers University Professor Doug Penfield used to say: A page a day is a book a year.

When I feel totally barren, I return to the writers I love. I read until I start believing **I** can say that. I can write that. And I do.

8. Simple writing reflects a simple mind

Nothing could be further from the truth. No one wants to be a considered a simpleton. But practiced writers know that the level of sophistication of the writing is linked to audience, not to them. Nobel Laureate Arno Penzias, responsible for the Big Bang and Black Hole theories, uses esoteric, highly technical language that defies understanding by none other than his peer astrophysicists. Yet, one night years ago I heard him talk on the Dick Cavett show in a language that a sixth grader could easily understand. Skilled writers are sufficiently versatile to adjust their material to match the comprehension levels of their readers. Don't be fooled by this myth. Simple writing can express profoundly complex ideas, as in much drama, fiction, and literary nonfiction.

You don't have to be Hemingway to become a critical reader and maintain sentence logic. Most people sit down and want to make a fancy entrance, commit an act of literature. After a while they become themselves, and throw away the first lines. Compare these two statements:

> The problem of order, and thus of the nature of the integration of stable systems of social interaction, that is, of social structure, thus focuses on the integration of the motivation of actors with the normative cultural standards which integrate the action system, in our context interpersonally. These standards are, in the terms used in the preceding chapter, patterns of value-orientation, and as such are a particularly crucial part of the cultural tradition of the social system. (Parsons qtd. in Lanham 70)

OR

I don't know about you, but I have this voice that goes: "What? NAW. That ain't no way to write a damn sentence! That's the limpest damn piddliest damn saddest-looking most clogged and whiney damn hitching-around piss-and-corruption-covered damn sentence I ever saw. Boy! Anybody can snuffle along through the pine straw! I want to see you down with your teeth in the dirt! Reaching and gnawing and chewing and gnashing on some *oak tree roots!* Right on down through to where the *juice* is. *Git* it. *Drive.* Show me something!" (Blount qtd. in Lindemann 125)

Now, which author would you rather sit next to at dinner?

At least to begin with, keep your creative writing conversational. You have a natural grammar at the tip of your tongue. Short fiction writer Grace Paley put it this way: If you say what is on your mind in the language that comes to you from your parents, your block and your friends, you'll probably be saying some very beautiful things.

Many of us go through the stages of writing song lyrics, Hallmark cards, hormone poems, I call them (or stories), about unrequited love, sexual stirrings, the last touch, the first good-bye, the greatest story ever told. You have felt them. I did. We get caught in Grade C rerun-thinking, clichés, abstract and stereotypical reality--me included. John Ciardi once said:

> I think most badness in poetry begins with a sense of importance. . I used to write important bad poems. Bit by bit I began to sense my own unimportance. Now I write only unimportant poems, and being the same sort of fool everyone else is, I begin to hope again. Perhaps, if I can make the poem small enough, I can get it down to life size. That isn't much but it is all there is, and therefore, everything; or at least as much as I can hope for. (17)

9. You have to like writing to do it well

It helps to love what you do. And to do well at what you love. But I write mostly whatever and whenever I need to--even if I do not particularly want to. Sometimes I write what I call cognitive or head poems--when I don't really feel strongly about the subject. Other times I write the predominantly feeling poems. These come out easily and relatively whole and unrevised. They start from different places, but they ultimately marry in my mind (Brand "On Seeing").

Facts are ultimately no good without feelings. So think and feel deeply about what you write. Look at the beginning of an article on teaching that I published some years ago:

> I think it was the department meeting about the final exam that started me. I was at the kitchen table going over some notes for a class when I heard some ideas (mostly violent ones) loitering in my head. I was arguing with my department. I had the good sense to rush to my typewriter (I don't always have one close at hand). The evening wore on. My son was docked from recreation because of a C- on a biology test. One daughter was rearranging her bedroom furniture for the third time. I got ready for bed and prepared to take a shower when I heard more of the same voice. I was still arguing with the department. This time in the bathroom. My husband keeps notepaper on the shelf where he empties his pockets so I quickly wrote down my ideas. Then after my shower, I went upstairs and added them to the first pages. More came

in the morning while I was still in pajamas.
It is easy to see that. . . . (Brand, *On Teaching* 18)

And so starts the discussion.

10. Writers are a special breed of people

Writers come from all socio-economic strata, from all educational backgrounds, and with distinctive stories. Don't be ashamed of your family or friends, their quirks. Don't be ashamed of your home or its peculiarities, its curious truths: a cousin of mine constantly washes his eyebrows; a maiden aunt covered with Band-Aids photos of relatives she disliked; my husband keeps me at bay by listening to public radio.

Probe something with childlike curiosity. One of my creative writing students wrote about wearing black every Friday to "make a statement." Another wrote about the competition between his father and him for the best designs they cut on their lawn with the rider mower. Ed Lueder's said it best:

Your Poem, Man . . .

unless there's one thing seen
suddenly against another--a parsnip
sprouting from a President, or
hailstones melting in an ashtray--
nothing really happens. It takes
surprise and wild connections,
doesn't it? A walrus chewing
on a ballpoint pen. Two blue tail-
lights on Tyrannosaurus Rex. Green
cheese teeth. Maybe what we wanted
least. Or most. Some unexpected
pleats. Words that never knew
each other till right now. Plug us
into the wrong socket and see
what blows--or what lights up.
Try
untried
circuitry,
new
fuses.
Tell it like it never really was,
man,
and maybe we can see it
like it is.
(Elkins, Kendall, and Willingham 415)

The biggest difference between writers and wannabees is that writers write. Intelligence is necessary but not sufficient for creativity. In other words, intelligence and creative ability are wedded only up to a point. Above a certain intellectual baseline, creativity separates from its cognitive base and moves in inexplicable ways toward the novel and illogical. We experience a rush of curious ideas. That's what makes the work creative. In fact, sometimes I believe that creative writing has to resist the intelligence almost entirely. So relax. Free associate until the right incongruity comes along. It will.

11. The writing process is the same for everyone

Clearly not. We have unique composing styles, cognitive styles, temperaments, and experiences. Capitalize on your idiosyncrasies. During what time period do you do your best writing? What location is most conducive to your creative imagination (kitchen table, attic, bed, beach)? What equipment facilitates your creative writing (legal pad, computer, felt tip pen, colored paper)? If you write better at 6:00 am, do it. If you write best evenings, do that. If you write best on a park bench, go there. Or in a local luncheonette, get a cup of coffee. I like writing on airplanes. So I travel prepared with paper, pencil, even a stapler and scissors for cutting and revising. I also like the Peak Quality #2 pencils, soft but not waxy. My family indulges me. My children buy them for me at Christmas to the tune of 17 cents apiece.

12. Writing is solitary and silent

Although I admit that I do my best revising serenely alone, I have discovered an interesting tool: Talking my writing to someone. Even if you experience writer's block, you probably don't have talker's block. When I am stuck, I read out loud sometimes the smallest sentence to the departmental secretary, to my husband, or, when all else fails, to myself. If I am having difficulty, sometimes I use a temporary crutch and start my piece as a letter. "Dear _____," becomes the scaffolding for finding and sustaining my natural voice and is removed later. If I am still having difficulty explaining myself out loud, I find a real person and I start my explanation with a WIRMTSI or "What I really mean to say is. . . " and the rest of the ideas inevitably and lucidly follow. What I am trying to say here is: Write **not** what you're supposed to say, but what you mean to say. Nothing more. Nothing less. Write to be understood, not to impress, not to make an effect. If you want to communicate, say exactly, and I mean exactly, what you want to say, no matter what. After the WIRMTSI has served its purpose, edit it out. When in doubt, you can do no worse than K I S S, Keep It Simple Sweetheart. Gradually you come to say something that you previously ignored because it was too difficult to express.

13. To reach the widest audience, stay as general as possible

I once had a student who, reaching thematically for global cooperation, used the pop culture expression "We are the World" several times in a poem. Apart from plagiarizing, John expected to embrace this highly complex notion in one overworked slogan, when in fact he moved no one in the group. Because we saw nothing. We touched nothing. New students of creative writing do not realize that by trying to say it all, they say nothing. If we are consumed by cosmic themes, the subject is buried or lost. If we concentrate on the subject, the themes take care of themselves.

Students believe that getting too specific disables readers from relating to a fictive situation because in the Northeast, for example, we say submarines and in the Midwest they say hoagies. So students end up writing lunch or sandwich--neither of which works. In a word, if words fit everyone, they fit no one.

As an author, your obligation is to promote emotional identification with the material. If a character leaves the ladies room with toilet paper stuck on the sole of her shoe, I transfer that embarrassing moment to the time I lost a cap of a molar on an olive at a dinner party. Or the time years ago my boss reminded me that the back of my dress was unzipped. What transfers is not an event per se but the emotional content that it triggers in you, by reminding you of a similar event in your own experience.

The route to memorable creative writing is found via the concrete and the specific. Name names. Name places. The minute details. Saying Howard is always

better than merely saying a man, because I can visualize a Howard better than I can Nondescript Man. It may not agree with your vision of Howard, but until you change my mind, it is what I need in order to hang meaning onto, to work up some empathy for. I trust that you as author will guide me along.

To summarize, give yourself permission to make mistakes. Good writing is durable but delicate. The procedure is simple. In a nutshell, just write down every idea about your subject that comes into your head. Don't throw out any ideas even if they sound silly. Don't try to rank them or evaluate their importance. Don't worry about being repetitious. Don't worry if you start writing about something else. You can always bring yourself back and edit later. Ignore correct grammar, spelling, punctuation for the time being. Try not to edit and compose at the same time. Strive for quantity; the more ideas the better. Keep your eye on the truth of the subject, your truth, not someone else's. The worst is over now. You have material on paper that you can develop, organize, and proofread.

In short, your first composing should be quick and dirty. Then your editing should be slow and careful. The process is nothing short of miraculous.

Note

[1] Among others, Peter Elbow, David Holbrook (72, 188+), Stephen Joseph, and Frank Smith (85) have articulated several of these misconceptions.

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